MANACLED

BOOK ONE

by senlinyu

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Summary

Harry Potter is dead. In the aftermath of the war, in order to strengthen the might of the magical world, Voldemort enacts a repopulation effort. Hermione Granger has an Order secret, lost but hidden in her mind, so she is sent as an enslaved surrogate to the High Reeve until her mind can be cracked.

Notes

Warning: This work is dark. Rape and non-consensual sex are a significant and ongoing aspect of the plot. There are also character deaths, psychological trauma, descriptions of battlefield violence, and references to torture. Reader discretion is advised.

Author's Note: The characters in this story are not mine: they belong to JK Rowling, whom I happen to not be. The initial inspiration of this plot occurred when watching the first episode of **The Handmaid's Tale**. In homage there are elements of it maintained throughout the story. The title High Reeve was drawn from Lady_of_Clunn's use in her story **Uncoffined.**

This story diverges from canon following the conclusion of Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.

Chapter 1

Hermione had long given up hope of seeing in the darkness. For a time, she thought maybe if she just let her eyes adjust, eventually some faint outline would become visible.

There were no glimmers of moonlight slipping through so deep in the dungeons. No torches in the hallways outside the cell. Just more and more darkness, until she wondered sometimes if she might be blind.

She had explored every inch of the cell with her fingertips. The door, sealed with magic, had no lock to pick, even if she had anything but straw and a chamber pot. She smelled the air in the hopes it might indicate something; the season, the distant scent of food or potions. The air was stale, wet, cold. Lifeless.

She had hoped if she just checked carefully enough, she'd find a loose slab-stone in the wall; some secret compartment hiding a nail, or a spoon, or even a bit of rope. Apparently the cell had never held an audacious prisoner. No scratches to mark time. No loose stones. Nothing.

Nothing but darkness.

She couldn't even talk aloud to relieve the unending silence. It had been Umbridge's parting gift after they had dragged her into the cell and checked her manacles one last time.

They had been about to leave when Umbridge paused and whispered, "*Silencio*."

Prodding Hermione's chin up with her wand so that their eyes met, she said, "You'll understand soon enough."

Umbridge giggled, and her cloying, sugary breath ghosted over Hermione's face.

Hermione had been left in darkness and silence.

Had she been forgotten? No one ever came. No torture. No interrogations. Just dark, silent solitude.

Meals appeared. Randomised so she couldn't even keep track of time.

She recited potion recipes in her head. Transfiguration technique. Reviewed runes. Nursery rhymes. Her fingers flicked as she mimicked wand techniques, mouthing the spell inflection. She counted backwards from a thousand by subtracting prime numbers.

She started working out. It had apparently not occurred to anyone to restrict her physically, and the cell was spacious enough that she could cartwheel diagonally across it. She learned how to do handstands. Spent what felt like hours doing push-ups and things called burpees that her cousin had been obsessed with one summer. She found that she could slot her feet through the bars of the cell door and do crunches while hanging upside down.

It helped turn her mind off. Counting. Pushing herself to new physical limits. When her arms and legs turned to jelly, she'd slump down into a corner and fall into a dreamless sleep.

It was the only way to make the end of the war stop playing in front of her eyes. Sometimes she wondered if she was dead. Maybe it was hell. Darkness and loneliness and nothing but her worst

memories hanging before her eyes for forever.

When there finally was a noise, it felt deafening. The screech in the distance as a long abandoned door swung open. Then light. Blinding, blinding light.

It was like being stabbed.

She stumbled back into the corner and covered her eyes.

“She's still alive,” she heard Umbridge say, sounding surprised. “Get her up, let’s see if she’s still lucid.”

Rough hands dragged Hermione from the corner and tried to pull her hands away from her eyes. Even with her eyelids squeezed tightly shut, the pain from the sudden brightness felt like knives driving into her corneas. She wrenched her hands back to press them over her eyes again, ripping her arms from her captors’ grasp.

“Oh, Merlin’s sake,” Umbridge said in a sharp, impatient voice. “Overpowered by a wandless Mudblood. *Petrificus Totalus* .”

Hermione’s body stiffened. Mercifully her eyes remained closed.

“You should have been smart enough to die. *Crucio* .”

The curse ripped through Hermione’s immobilised body. Umbridge wasn’t the strongest caster Hermione had been cursed by, but she meant it. The pain tore through Hermione like fire. Unable to move, she felt like her insides were twisting into knots, trying to escape the pain. Her head throbbed as the pain built and built without any release.

After an eternity, the pain stopped, and yet didn’t. The curse was ended, but the agony remained coiled inside, as though her nerves were flayed.

Hermione could feel her brain scrabbling to escape; to break free of the suspended agony. Just break. Just break. But she couldn’t.

“Take her up for appraisal. Let me know promptly what the healer says.”

She was levitated, but the world remained a blur of sound and agony. So much sound. It felt as though the vibrations were grating across her skin. She must have been kept inside a barrier ward because suddenly the air exploded with noise and light.

She tried to hold on by focusing only on the tap of footsteps. Straight for ten paces. A right. Thirty paces. A left. Fifteen paces. Stop. One of the guards levitating her rapped on a door.

“Come in,” said a muffled voice.

The door grated open.

“Put her over there.” Hermione felt her body drop onto an examination table.

She felt a wand prod her.

“Recent spell work?”

“Immobilisation and the cruciatus,” answered a new voice. Hermione thought she recognised it, but

her mind was too awhirl with agony to place it.

“While immobilised?” The healer sounded peeved. “How long?”

“A minute. Maybe more.”

A hiss of irritation. “We hardly have enough as it is. Is Umbridge trying to ruin them? Strap her down. She’ll injure herself otherwise when I take the spells off."

Hermione felt leather straps bind her wrists and ankles, and something was forced between her teeth. There was a wand tap on her temple.

“Yoo-hoo. Little witch, if your mind isn’t already mush. This is going to hurt—a lot. But,” he continued cheerily, “you will feel better afterwards. *Finite Incantatem! ”*

Hermione’s world exploded. It was like being hit with the cruciatus all over again. Finally mobile, her body recoiled, and she screamed and thrashed. The straps holding her down barely stopped her from arching backward as she writhed, and rocked, and wailed in agony. It seemed like an eternity before she could stop thrashing. Long after her voice had given out. Her muscles still twitched violently, and her chest heaved with sobs.

“Alright. You can go now,” the healer said as he prodded Hermione again with his wand. “But tell Umbridge if another one arrives like this, I will report her for sabotage.”

Hermione cracked an eye open and watched the guards leave. Her vision blurred. Everything was so agonisingly bright, but she could make out vague shapes and the light hurt less. Or rather, other things hurt more than her eyes did.

The healer returned to her. He was a large man. She didn’t recognise him. She squinted, trying to see him clearly.

“Oh good, you’re tracking movement.” He turned her wrist to get the prison number from the manacle. “Number 273...”

He pulled a narrow file off a shelf and furrowed his brow as he skimmed it.

“Mudblood, obviously. Hogwarts student. Oh, very good marks. Hmmm. Unknown curse to the abdomen in fifth year. Not a very good sign. Well, we’ll see what we have to work with.”

He performed a complex diagnostic spell over her. She watched her magical signature float overhead and various orbs of color arrange themselves along her body. The healer prodded them and scribbled notes. He was particularly interested in her abdomen, especially an orb tinged with purple.

“What—,“ she rasped around the gag still between her teeth, “—what are you looking at?”

“Hmm? Oh, a variety of things; your physical health, mostly. You're in remarkably good condition. Where have they been keeping you? Although none of that matters if I can’t figure out this old curse you’re still carrying.”

He worked in silence for several more minutes before chuckling. With a complicated flip of his wand and an incantation Hermione couldn’t make out, she watched a dark stream of purple flame shoot into her stomach. Her insides suddenly started bubbling, and she felt something writhing alive among her organs. Something crawling inside her. Before she could scream, the healer sent a red

spell streaking into her. The writhing stopped, and it felt like something had dissolved inside her.

“A miscast spell,” the healer explained. “Someone wanted you eaten alive, but fortunately for you their curse was incomplete. I fixed it and then cancelled it. You’re welcome.”

Hermione said nothing. She doubted any of it was for her benefit.

“Well. You’re cleared. Eligible too. I think we'll get quite a bit of use out of you. Although that cruciatus will probably require some therapy before you’ll recover from it. I’ll put in a note.”

With a flick of his wand, the straps around her wrists and ankles released. Hermione sat up slowly. Her muscles were still twitching involuntarily.

Opening the door, the healer called out, “She passed. You can process her.”

He walked over to his desk.

Everything was weirdly luminous. She squinted. So bright she could hardly see past the light to make out the shapes around her.

Reaching up with a shaky hand, she pulled the gag from between her teeth. They immediately started chattering. She realised that she was terribly, terribly cold. Too cold.

The guard was approaching her, reaching for her arm to lead her away. She slid off the table and tried to stand.

She wobbled.

“Siiiiir...”

Was that her voice? She didn’t remember what her voice sounded like.

The words came out slurred, and all the luminous objects in the room seemed to stretch and distort before her eyes as if she’d been dropped into a goldfish bowl. The healer turned back toward her quizzically.

“I thinnn’ k mmmmm going ‘nto sshhh—“ The words couldn’t seem to come out through her chattering teeth. She tried again “shhhh-shhhhh-shhhhhhooooook...”

Darkness suddenly started seeping into the edges of her vision. All the luminous things faded until all she could see was the healer’s concerned face swimming before her. Her eyes rolled back and she fell.

No one caught her.

Her head hit the corner of the table. Hard.

“Fuck!” swore the guard. Even sound seemed wobbly and distorted.

The last thing Hermione remembered was that she thought he might be Marcus Flint.

Regaining consciousness felt like drowning in oatmeal. Hermione wasn’t sure why it was the first comparison that came to mind. She fought to drag herself to the surface, moving toward muffled voices, trying to make sense of them. “Sixteen months in solitary confinement with light and sound deprivation! By all counts she should be entirely insane, if not dead. There aren’t even any records

on her! As if you dropped her into a bottomless pit! Look at this file. Prisoner 187 in the bed next door! Do you see how many pages there are? Checkups! Blood reports! Mental health sessions! Prescribed potions! I even have pictures of her to see how she looked before you maimed her. This one here—nothing! She was recorded as being assigned to this prison, and then she vanished! No one has seen her! There isn't even any record of her eating anything! For sixteen months! Explain how this happened!"

There was a pause, and then Hermione heard, "Ahem-hem."

Umbridge's simpering voice began wheedling, "There are so many prisoners here. It can hardly be surprising if one or two manage to fall through the cracks as Miss Granger did."

"Miss—Granger—," the other voice was suddenly horrified and stuttering. "As in THE Granger? You knew it was her! You tried to kill her."

"What? No! I would never—It is for the Dark Lord to decide their fates. I am merely a servant."

"Did you really think our Lord would forget about a prisoner like Hermione Granger? Do you think he will be forgiving if he learns what you did?"

"I didn't mean for it to go on so long! It was meant simply as a temporary situation. You don't know her. You don't know what she's capable of. I had to be sure she couldn't escape or reach out. The castle was still being re-warded. Then—then by the time all the preparations had been made—She—she had slipped from my mind. I would never defy our Lord!" "The success of the enterprise our Lord has assigned rests upon your head and mine. If I discover so much as a hint that you have done anything else to undermine his agenda, I will report you immediately to him. As it is, Granger is now entirely under my jurisdiction. You are not to go near her without my permission. If anything else happens to her, by anyone else, I will assume you were responsible for it."

"But—but she has many enemies." Umbridge's voice wavered.

"Then I suggest you oversee your prison carefully. The Dark Lord named her specifically in his plans. I will throw you before him today if that's what it takes to succeed. I have worked longer and harder to get where I am than you have, Warden. I will not let anyone get in my way. Go process the rest of them. The Dark Lord expects a report on eligibility numbers tonight, and I've wasted half my day fixing your mistake."

A pair of footsteps faded. Umbridge's, Hermione thought and hoped. She cracked an eye open, trying to take in her surroundings surreptitiously.

"You're awake."

Not surreptitiously enough. She opened her eyes fully and looked up at the blurry outline of a healer standing over her. The healer leaned closer to study Hermione, and Hermione could make her out somewhat against the brightness. An older woman, severe, with robes denoting medical seniority.

"So, you're Hermione Granger."

Hermione wasn't sure how to respond to the comment. The overheard conversation hadn't shed light on what was wanted with her. She was important to some dreadful machination of Voldemort. She wasn't supposed to be dead or insane, and they wanted her healthy. They probably weren't supposed to torture her horribly again.

She stayed quiet, hoping the healer was the sort who kept talking when people failed to respond. She was disappointed.

“I’ll have to ask you, since no one else seems to know. How are you still alive? How did you manage to stay sane?”

“I...d-don’t—know...” Hermione answered after waiting for several moments. Her voice sounded deeper and wobblier than she remembered. Her vocal chords felt atrophied. It was difficult to pace words; the consonants slurred together and then paused as though it required effort to push them out. “I did—mental arithmancy... I...recited potions. I did my best... to keep from—slipping.”

“Remarkable,” the healer murmured, scribbling notes into a file. “But how did you survive? There’s no record of anyone feeding you, and yet you’ve been perfectly maintained nutritionally.”

“I—don’t...know. Food appeared. There was never a set time. I thought—it was intentional.” “What was intentional?”

“The irregularity…I thought it“—her throat felt exhausted as she kept speaking—“was part of the...sensory deprivation. To keep—me... from knowing…how much time—had passed.”

Her voice got thinner and thinner with every word.

“Oh. Yes. That would have been creative. And your physical condition? You were never removed from that room. Yet you have better muscle tone than half my healers. How on earth is that possible?”

“When...I couldn’t—bear to think, I’d exercise—until I couldn’t anymore.”

“What kind of exercises?”

“Anything. Jumping. Pushups. Crunches. Anything—that tired me... So I wouldn’t dream.”

More scribbling.

“What kind of dreams were you trying to avoid?”

Hermione’s breath caught slightly. The other questions had been easy. That—that went too close to something real.

“Dreams of before.”

“Before?”

“*Before I came here* .” Hermione’s voice was quiet. Furious. She closed her eyes; the light was giving her a severe migraine.

“Of course.” More scribbling. The sound made Hermione’s muscles flinch reactively. “You’ll be here in the infirmary until the side effects from your torture sessions are fully relieved. I will also be bringing in a specialist to figure out what happened to your brain.”

Hermione’s eyes snapped open.

“Is there—,“ she hesitated. “Is there something—*wrong* with me?” The healer stared at her contemplatively before waving her wand over Hermione’s head.

“You were kept in sensory-deprived isolation for sixteen months. The fact you're lucid at all is a miracle. The effects of such an experience can hardly be avoided, especially given the circumstances prior to your arrival. I imagine you studied some healing during the war?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, looking down at the blanket on her lap. It was threadbare and smelled so strongly of antiseptic she wanted to gag from the olfactory assault.

“Then you know what a normal, healthy magical brain looks like. This is yours.” A simple wand manipulation drew the magically projected image of Hermione’s brain into view.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. Scattered across the projection were little glowing lights; some clustered, some sporadic. All over her brain. She’d never seen such a thing before.

“What are those?”

“My best guess is that they're magically created fugue states.”

“What?”

“At some point during your isolation, your magic began trying to protect you. Since you couldn’t express any magic externally, it internalised itself. You worked hard to keep yourself from, as you said, slipping. However, the mind is hardly equipped to handle such a thing. Your magic has walled off parts of your mind. As a result, it fragmented you somewhat. Normally a fugue is general, but these appear almost surgically precise. Although mind healing isn’t my specialty.”

Hermione stared in horror.

“Do you mean I—I disassociated?”

“Something like that. I've never actually seen anything like this before. This might be a new magical malady.”

“Do—I have multiple personalities?” Hermione felt suddenly faint.

“No. You’ve simply isolated parts of your mind. I think your magic intended to protect them from mental attacks, but by extension it prevented you from accessing them.”

Hermione was reeling internally.

“What—don’t I *remember* ?”

“Well, we aren’t entirely sure. You’ll have to be the one to discover what you’ve forgotten. What are your parents’ names?”

Hermione paused a moment, trying to calculate if the question was based on seeking a diagnosis or potentially to extract information. Blood drained from her face.

“I don’t know,” she said, suddenly feeling as though she couldn’t breathe. “I remember I had parents. They were—Muggles. But—I can’t remember *anything* about them.”

Struggling to tamp down on the panic rising inside of her, she stared imploringly at the healer.

“Do you know anything?” “I’m afraid not. Let’s try another question. Do you remember the school you went to? Who were your best friends there?”

“Hogwarts. Harry and Ron,” Hermione said, looking down as her throat tightened. Her fingers twitched uncontrollably.

“Good.”

“Do you remember the headmaster?”

“Dumbledore.”

“Do you remember what happened to him?”

“He died,” Hermione said, squeezing her eyes shut. Although the details felt fuzzy, she was sure.

“Yes. Do you remember the circumstances of his death?”

“No. I remember—he was reinstated as headmaster after it was confirmed that Vold-Vold—You-Know-Who had returned.”

“Interesting.” There was more scribbling. “What is it that you remember of the war?”

“I was a healer. I was in the hospital ward. So many people I couldn’t save—I remember losing. Something—something didn’t work. Harry died. They—they hung him up off the Astronomy Tower, and we watched him rot. They—they hung Ron and his family next to him. And Tonks and Lupin. They tortured them until they died. Then they put me in that cell and left me there.”

Hermione was shaking as she spoke. The hospital bed shook and made an angry creaking noise.

The healer didn't appear to notice and scribbled more notes.

“This is very unusual and interesting. I’ve never heard of a fugue state like this before. I’m anxious to hear what a specialist thinks.”

“Glad to be so interesting,” Hermione said, her lip curling as she opened her eyes to glare at the healer.

“Now now, dear. I’m not entirely callous. Look at it from a medical perspective. If there was anything in your past that would be logical for your mind to protect itself from, it would be the aftermath of the war—which you are clearly traumatised by. Instead, what did you subconsciously decide to protect? The identities of your parents, and the Order’s war strategy. Your magic didn’t choose to protect your psyche, it chose to protect everyone else. That is very interesting.”

Hermione supposed it was, but it just all felt like too much. Just being able to see again was overwhelming. Being able to speak. Being out of her cell. Everything felt like it was too much. Too raw. Too bright.

She didn’t say anything else. After a few minutes of scribbling, the healer looked up again.

“Unless the specialist has an objection, you’ll stay in the infirmary for a week for recovery before we process you. That will give you time to acclimate to light and sound again and undergo the therapy you’ll need for your torture recovery and that concussion you got during your check up.”

The healer started to walk away but then paused. “I hope my saying this is unnecessary, but I suppose given your house and history I should say it nonetheless. You are at a crossroads currently, Miss Granger. What will happen to you next is inevitable, but you have a choice in how unpleasant

you force it to be."

With that parting—advice? A threat? A warning? Hermione wasn't entirely sure. The healer disappeared behind the dividing curtain.

Hermione glanced around at her surroundings carefully. She was still in Hogwarts. She had been changed out of her prison clothes into a set of hospital pajamas. Pulling up the sleeves, she noted with disappointment that no one had made the mistake of taking off the manacles locked around each wrist.

She held a wrist up in front of her face to inspect them. They had been snapped onto her immediately before she had been imprisoned in her cell, and she had never gotten a chance to really see what they looked like.

In the light, they simply appeared to be a pair of bracelets around each wrist. They shone like a new penny. They were copper-plated, as she had guessed.

In the darkness of her cell, she had spent an untold amount of time trying to ascertain exactly what they were. The simple answer was that they suppressed her magic. How exactly they did so, and how she might get around them while blind and mute had taken much thought.

When she finally admitted to herself that it was impossible to get around them, she began to figure out how they worked.

She both hated and admired whoever had developed them. She was positive by the way the copper conducted her magic that they had a dragon heartstring core in each of them, possibly even taken from her own wand.

The manacles felt specifically attuned to her.

In her cell during all her attempts to wield wandless magic, the magic slipped down her arms toward her hands to be cast and then just—dissolved when it reached the manacles. Confirming for herself now that they were copper-plated, she understood immediately how it worked. Copper sucked the magic into itself. She remembered Binns lecturing in History of Magic about the attempts to use materials other than wood for wands. Copper had been one of the obvious choices due to its natural magic conductivity. Unfortunately, it was too conductive. It sucked up any flicker of magic that it detected, whether it was meant to or not. Spells exploded out of copper wands before a wizard could finish casting. They could barely touch the wands without having them go off. Two blown up wand labs and the loss of four toes convinced wand makers to try something other than copper.

The core of the manacles, Hermione felt positive, was iron. The copper paired with dragon heartstring snatched up her magic and then deposited it into the iron core where it was effectively neutralised.

The ingenuity made her seethe.

Iron manacles were common enough in Wizarding prisons. They dampened magic enough to keep prisoners from casting anything powerful. It had always been impossible to fully neutralise a witch or wizard's magic with iron. They could always push a little bit of magic past it or just let it build up until a wave of accidental magic exploded from them. The copper solved that. With its eager conductivity, especially aided with a magical core matching the prisoner's wand, the copper sucked

up almost every bit of building magic inside Hermione.

It effectively made her a Muggle.

Chapter 2

“Hermione…” she heard someone breathe.

Looking up sharply from her manacles, she saw a head poking through the dividing curtain. She squinted and stared. It was Hannah Abbott.

A low gasp of horror escaped Hermione’s lips.

Hannah only had one eye.

Her right eye was staring at Hermione, but her left eye was gone. There was a black, gaping hole in her head as though it had been plucked out.

Hannah’s hand immediately darted up and covered the left side of her face.

“Sorry. It’s always awful for people the first time they see it.”

“What—happened?” Hermione forced the words out.

She didn’t know of any curse that removed eyes in such a manner. There were plenty of blinding hexes, but none with such grotesque results.

“Umbridge—she popped it out with the tip of her wand when—when I tried to escape. She made the healers keep it like this. For effect.” Hannah turned her head slightly away to conceal her face further.

“She got into trouble for it though.” Hannah lowered her face so that she was gazing at the floor. Her voice sounded as if she was somehow dead. “She normally cuts off fingers now. If you’re disrespectful. If you try to get away. If you look at her wrong. Parvati and Angelina, they hardly have any fingers left.”

Hannah looked hard at Hermione with her remaining eye.

“Let your Gryffindor die, Hermione. Don’t try to be brave. Don’t try to be clever. Just keep your head down. People have been trying to get out for months. Anyone who gets caught gets maimed. Anyone—who gets out—it took too many tries before we realised—the manacles we’ve all got—,” Hannah raised her own copper encased wrist, “they’ve got a trace in them. If you get past the wards, they send the High Reeve and hang the corpse in the Great Hall so that we all have to watch it decay.”

Hermione felt as though she’d been struck violently in the chest. Her fingers spasmed against the fabric of the blanket covering her. She could barely breathe. “Who?”

“Ginny. She was the first body they brought back. We all thought maybe you had actually gotten out. Because you disappeared. We didn’t realise they’d just put you somewhere else...” Hannah’s voice trailed off, and she stared at Hermione. “You don’t even know why they brought you out, do you?”

Hermione shook her head. “The guards talk a lot. After the war, we all expected the Dark Lord would start enslaving the Muggles. But—it turns out his ranks were more exhausted than we

realised. Apparently being immortal makes him patient. He decided that repopulating the ranks of pure-blood wizards should be first on his agenda. He personally paired off all the pure-bloods. Made them all get married with orders to start reproducing."

Hannah's face was twisted with disdain as she recited this information.

Hermione's eyebrows furrowed with surprise. A repopulation effort? The war had dragged on with high casualties given the size of the wizarding population, but Hermione hadn't thought Voldemort would notice, much less care. Arranged marriages weren't exactly uncommon among pure-bloods—but having them mandated seemed extreme. She wondered how his followers had felt.

"There were—barely any babies. Pure-blood fertility rates have been dropping for years. There were a few pregnancies that set everyone abuzz. Most ended up squib and got terminated before the end. Or miscarried. Well,"—Hannah's voice grew bitter—"apparently facing the extinction of the European wizarding world has opened the Dark Lord's mind somewhat in regard to blood purity. Magic is might, you know. He's decided to start a breeding program with all these half-blood and Muggle-born prisoners he happens to have on hand. Just us girls, since it's a fate worse than death to have a Muggle-born male touch a pure-blood female. We're all to be made to produce babies until our uteruses give out."

Hannah looked as sick as Hermione was beginning to feel.

"So that's why they finally let you out," said Hannah, gesturing helplessly. "They're using school and medical records to decide which of us are eligible. That healer you were speaking to—she's the head of the whole thing. Apparently she specializes in magical genetics. We're her lab rats. They're checking everyone's fertility."

Hannah was crying now. Hermione stared at her, feeling faint with shock. It couldn't be true. It was all just too horribly dystopian. Some nightmare she was dreaming up inside her cell.

"We—have to get out," Hermione said in as steady a voice as she could manage.

Hannah shook her head.

"We can't. Didn't you hear me earlier? Unless you can chop off your hands, you'll never be able to leave with those manacles. They don't even keep the trace here. Angelina lost her pointer finger to find that out. The Dark Lord keeps it personally. That's why whenever anyone gets away, it's always the High Reeve who goes after them. "

Hannah looked quickly around, tilting her head to get a slightly better view of the floor beyond the privacy curtains. Hermione followed Hannah's gaze. There was nothing there.

"Who? Who is the High Reeve?" Hermione asked. She didn't remember that title.

Hannah looked up. "I don't know. None of us have ever seen him without his mask. Everyone talks about him. He's the Dark Lord's right hand. Voldemort doesn't go out much, so the High Reeve appears instead. They held public executions a few weeks ago—more than twenty people. He killed every single one with the Killing Curse. He didn't take breaks. He just went straight down the line. No one has even seen the Dark Lord cast that many in a row." "That—shouldn't be possible," Hermione said, shaking her head doubtfully.

Hannah leaned forward and lowered her voice. "I know. But I've seen the bodies after he catches the

runners. He always catches them. McGonagall, Moody, Neville, Dean, Seamus, Professor Sprout, Madam Pomfrey, Flitwick, Oliver Wood; those are the ones you'd know. There have been more. Loads more. The Order members were the ones who tried hardest to get away. They all came back corpses. It's always the Killing Curse."

Hannah hesitated and stared intently at Hermione. "Don't do something stupid, Hermione. I'm not telling you all this so you'll try to escape. I'm trying to warn you. It's hell. You need to be prepared for that because—if you aren't—you're going to walk out there and get maimed, and it won't even mean anything."

Hannah seemed about to say something else, but footsteps sounded beyond the curtains. An expression of terror rippled across her face, and the dividing curtain fell as she retreated.

The curtain on the other side of Hermione snapped open, and the healer from earlier reappeared, looking harried.

"The Dark Lord wants to watch your examination himself," the healer said, reaching out and grabbing Hermione's arm forcefully.

Hermione tried instinctively to get away. She jerked her arm out of the healer's grip and dropped off the other side of the bed in order to create distance.

"Oh, you stupid little witch." The healer sighed, and gestured to someone standing out of Hermione's vision. "Stun her and bring her."

Two guards appeared from behind the curtain and shot two successive stunners at Hermione. The first she dodged, but the second nicked her shoulder. She dropped like a stone.

When she re-awoke, she was strapped down on a table in a dark hall. Her arms and legs were restrained, still twitching from torture. More straps went over her forehead and chin, holding her head in place. There was a small wizard standing on one side of her. Voldemort himself was standing on the other.

The small wizard was speaking in a thin, trembling voice, gesturing up at a projection of Hermione's brain. "It—it's unlike anything I've ever seen b-before. Normally magical m-m-memory loss occurs q-q-quite generally across the brain when it is s-s-self generated. A p-person can't even tell you their name. But this is t-targeted. Like obliviation spells. A dissociative fugue, or in this case m-many of them. Almost like self-obliviation. Her magic has hidden specific memories inside what I can only describe as almost a c-c-calcification of magical layers. It probably could never have happened without the specific cir-circumstances of her imprisonment. This t-t-took time. Her brain has been slowly shoring up a line of d-defense over the course of months. Almost like a clam making a pearl, she's been slowly burying them under layer after layer. You c-can tell some have been more extensively protected than others based on how brightly they g-g-glow."

Voldemort's eyes were narrowed. "Could these memories be recovered with legilimency?"

The small wizard looked more nervous. Faint droplets of perspiration had collected on his upper lip.

"It's—it's unlikely. This is like an individual occlumency wall of exceptional strength around each specific memory. It's—it's p-possible if the legilimens is sufficiently p-p-powerful."

"I like to think I am," Voldemort said, looking down into Hermione's eyes. She squeezed them shut

instantly, but it was too late.

She thought—she might have known occlumency before. With her magic mostly stolen away, she had no ability to create a wall around her mind. Voldemort shot in like an arrow, burying himself deeply among her memories and then sifting slowly through them. It was as though her mind were being crushed under his.

Her childhood. Hogwarts. He wasn't concerned with her locked memories of her parents. After fifth year, when everything grew hazy, his interest sharpened. He examined her memories of healing. All those bodies. All those injuries. So many people. The closer he got to the end of the war, the more memories were locked. He tried driving into them. He tried stabbing his way through the magic with sheer force. None of them would give away to his violent, insistent attacks.

It was breaking her. The force was mind-numbingly painful, and somehow the pain continued to increase until it felt impossible that she wasn't dying from it. Hermione was writhing as she sought to get away—to escape the invasion. Screaming surrounded her and just kept going on, and on, and on.

Finally Voldemort withdrew from her mind. Furious. She slowly became aware that the screams had been hers. By then, they had been reduced to tiny mewling wails of pain past shredded vocal chords. Guttural sobs that kept choking out as her chest kept spasming from pain, and she struggled to breathe.

"I do not like secrets kept from me. With Potter dead there should be nothing left to conceal. What are you hiding?" Voldemort hissed. His bony fingers seized her face and turned it so that she met his eyes. "I—don't—know—," she said. Her voice was rasping and broken, and she weakly tried to pull her jaw free from his hold.

"Call Severus! And the Warden. She shall be punished for this," Voldemort said. He viciously probed Hermione's mind until she lay limp and barely conscious on the table.

Umbridge arrived first, looking appropriately terrified.

"My Lord, my Lord," she said, dropping to the ground and crawling toward him.

" *Crucio* ." Voldemort cast the curse, his fury evident in his tone.

Umbridge screamed. She screamed, and screamed, and writhed on the ground. Hermione almost felt sorry for her.

After several minutes, he finally stopped.

"Did you think, Warden, that following the letter but not the spirit of my commands would spare you?"

Umbridge only whimpered.

"I knew of your dislike for the Mudblood, but I had hoped your obedience to me would be sufficient motivation for you to restrain yourself. Perhaps you need a permanent reminder." "My Lord—"

"What is that punishment you're so fond of doling out among your charges? Knuckles, isn't it? Tell me, Warden, how many fingers will you have left if I take a knuckle for each month you spent

trying to drive the Mudblood insane?"

"Noooooooo." Umbridge voice rose in a shriek. She was still shaking and spasming on the ground.

"Perhaps I should be lenient," Voldemort said, walking slowly toward her as she sniveled and grovelled at his feet. "Your work has been mostly good. Instead of sixteen, I'll halve it. Eight knuckles as a reminder I said I wanted Potter's Mudblood left *fully* intact."

"Pleeeease..." Umbridge was pushing herself up off the ground, sobbing.

Severus Snape swept into the room.

"What's wrong? Unable to endure consequences of your own devising?" Voldemort sneered, and waved a hand as he turned away from Umbridge. "Take her away. Drop her back at her prison when you're done."

Two Death Eaters came forward and dragged Umbridge from the room as she begged and wailed apologies. "Severus, my faithful servant," Voldemort said, turning toward the Potion Master. "I find myself with a puzzle on my hands."

"My Lord," Snape said, folding his hands respectfully in front of him and lowering his eyes.

"You remember the Mudblood, I presume." Voldemort moved back toward Hermione, staring down at her and running a skeletal finger along his lipless mouth.

"Of course. She was an insufferable student to teach." Snape walked over to survey Hermione, who was still strapped down on the table.

"Indeed, and a good friend of Harry Potter, the boy who died," Voldemort said, caressing his wand lightly. "She was also a member of the Order as I'm sure you recall from your many years as my spy. When Potter died, she was captured, and I ordered her imprisoned but left intact in case I ever had need of her. Unfortunately, the warden at Hogwarts saw fit to dole out her own punishment for past offenses. She imprisoned the Mudblood all this time in a cell under sensory deprivation."

Snape's eyes widened slightly.

Voldemort rested a hand on Snape's shoulder. "According to the mind healers, the experience enabled the Mudblood to lock away her memories. Sealing them off from herself and from me. The identities of her parents—which is of no consequence. More vitally, a great many memories from the war, particularly near the end. This memory loss occurred *after* Potter died—after the war had ended. What is it that she would be hiding?" There was menace in Voldemort's low sinuous voice. He paused for a moment and then looked down at Hermione. "Perhaps as someone who knew her during that time, you would have some insight into what is missing."

"Of course, My Lord."

Hermione found Snape's cold, bottomless eyes peering down at her. She didn't have any strength left to try resisting as he sank into her consciousness. He didn't bother with her early memories. He went directly to the war and swept through the memories quickly but thoroughly. He seemed to have specific categories he pursued. Healing. Potion brewing. Order meetings. Research. Conversations with Harry and Ron. Fighting. The final battle. Whenever Snape came upon a locked memory, he seemed to pause and consider its surroundings before trying to break into it.

His invasion was dramatically less traumatic than Voldemort's, but Hermione was still weeping and shuddering by the time he finally slowly withdrew. Her hands clenching spasmodically where they were strapped in place.

"Fascinating," he said, staring down at Hermione with a somewhat conflicted expression.

"Any insight?" Voldemort's hand tightened on Snape's shoulder, and his tone was suspicious. Snape turned from Hermione and lowered his eyes. "To be honest, My Lord, the Mudblood and I had very little contact during later years of the war. The Order meetings I was privy to are all there. The little else I knew of her was that she was kept away from the fighting, acting as a healer and potion mistress. Those memories appear intact. I am at a loss as to what she could be hiding."

"If the Order had any remaining secrets left, I want to know them," Voldemort said, his scarlet eyes narrowing.

"Indeed," Snape said, his tone silken and demure. "Unfortunately, most of the highly informed Order members are dead now. Either during the final battle, or from torture or escape attempts. Aside from Miss Granger herself, there is likely no one else still alive carrying the information."

Voldemort stared down at Hermione. His red eyes were enraged and calculating as he ran a finger slowly along his mouth. Then he looked sharply over at the mind healer.

"Is there any way to recover these memories?" Voldemort said, his wand hanging from his fingertips with casual menace.

"Well, th-that's very difficult t-to s-s-say." The healer paled. "It's p-p-possible. Now that the circumstances causing it-have been removed. With t-t-time, th-they may restore themselves."

"What about torture? I have broken through to obliviated memories with torture in the past."

The mind healer looked green."It m-m-might work. B-b-but—there'd be no telling which ones you'd unlock. You m-m-might only get a f-few b-before she went insane."

Voldemort stared speculatively down at Hermione. "Then I want her watched. Carefully. By someone who will know the instant they begin to return. Severus, I shall leave her in your charge."

"Of—course, My Lord." Snape bowed low.

"You object?" Voldemort using his wandtip to force Snape upright. He tilted Snape's head back until their eyes met.

"Never. Your wish is my command." Snape's collected expression rippled under the scrutiny.

"Yet you have objections," Voldemort said, withdrawing his wand and turning back to stare down at Hermione.

"I am departing tomorrow for Romania," Snape said, "to investigate the rumors of insubordination we have heard about. The trip, as you noted when you assigned it to me, will be a delicate task, complex and rigorous even without the addition of a prisoner who requires careful monitoring. I—am reluctant to disappoint you in either of these matters." He placed his hand on his chest and bowed again.

Voldemort paused and seemed to be considering, resting his hands on the table beside Hermione and

leaning over to study her. As he stood there, a movement on Hermione's other side caught her attention. The female healer in charge of Voldemort's breeding program had approached and was whispering a question to the mind healer.

"M-My Lord," the mind healer said, stepping hesitantly closer, "Healer Stroud has brought to my attention a p-point that m-m-may interest you."

"Yes?" Voldemort's interest appeared negligible. He did not look up toward either healer.

"Magical pregnancy, My Lord," Healer Stroud said with a proud smile. "There are a few cases on record which indicate that such pregnancies have an ability to break through magical fugues. The magic of a child is compatible but dissimilar enough to its mother's to have a corroding effect on built up magic. It's nothing conclusive, given the rarity. It's possible, however. Miss Granger has exceptional magical ability—you yourself noted this and wanted her included in the repopulation effort. If you leave her within the program, there is a chance that a pregnancy may result in unlocking her memories. But—," she hesitated slightly.

"What?" Voldemort looked up sharply at Healer Stroud, causing her to pale and flinch.

"You—you would be unable to inspect her mind during the pregnancy." Healer Stroud said, speaking quickly. "Invasive magics such as legilimency carry a high risk of miscarriage. It's often so traumatic that it can result in permanent magical infertility. You would have to wait, even if you knew the memories were returning, until the baby was born. Unless the father, who would share a familiar magical signature with the child, were the one performing the legilimency."

Voldemort stared down at Hermione thoughtfully, his fingers sliding over his chest as though he were soothing an injury.

"Severus."

"My Lord."

"The High Reeve is an exceptional legilimens, is he not?"

"Indeed, My Lord," Snape said. "His skill is likely equal to my own. You had him trained quite carefully."

"His wife has been found magically barren, has she not?"

The question was directed toward Healer Stroud.

"Yes, My Lord," she answered immediately.

"Then send the Mudblood to the High Reeve. Let him breed and monitor her."

Stroud nodded eagerly. "I can have her there in two weeks. I want to ensure her condition and have her trained." "Two weeks. Until she is found pregnant, I want her brought in every other month so I can examine her mind personally." "Yes, My Lord."

"Take her back to Hogwarts, then." Voldemort dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

Hermione's body was still spasming slightly as the restraints on her were spelled off. She felt as though she ought to do—something. Spit. Or refuse. Or—beg.

Anything but just lie there while Voldemort casually delegated her off for breeding.

Her body refused to cooperate. She couldn’t do anything as careless hands dragged her up off the table and levitated her down a hallway.

Chapter 3

The bed Hannah had occupied was empty when Hermione was returned to the hospital ward in Hogwarts.

Healer Stroud poured a potion down Hermione’s throat as soon as she was placed in the bed. The pain in Hermione's mind subsided slightly. She blinked, and the dancing black spots that kept obscuring her vision finally started to fade away.

Hermione felt nauseous. Her insides were roiling and cringing like she had poison inside that her body couldn’t expel. She was still shaking. She wanted to roll over and curl into a ball, but she couldn’t summon the strength to manage it.

“Guard her with your lives. If anyone wants to touch her or so much as look at her, they will require permission from me,” she heard Healer Stroud say.

Hermione turned and could vaguely make out two large men standing behind Stroud. Their eyes were cold as they stared down at Hermione.

Stroud cast several monitor wards on Hermione that rose up, shimmering around her body. After she had inspected the projections for a few minutes, Stroud turned and strode away, her healer robes billowing out behind her.

Hermione stared up at the ceiling, trying to absorb everything that had happened to her that day.

She felt like she should be crying, but she couldn’t summon the tears.

Resignation and hopelessness had entwined themselves with her soul since the moment she watched Harry die.

After watching most of the people she loved die in agony, she’d known her turn to suffer was lying in wait.

Now it had come.

Death had never frightened Hermione. Her fear had always been in the manner of death. She had watched the worst ways to go.

Harry’s death had been a mercy killing compared to the torture the Weasleys, Remus and Tonks had been subjected to.

Lucius Malfoy had been standing mere feet from where Hermione was caged when he looked up at Ron and snarled “This is for my wife!” Then he cast a curse that turned Ron’s blood gradually into molten lead. Hermione watched as the curse slowly crept through Ron’s body, destroying him from the inside out. She’d been helpless to do anything—helpless to spare him in any way.

Arthur Weasley had been left permanently addled by a curse during the war. He cried, not even understanding why he was in pain or that he was dying.

They had left Molly for last. So she’d watch all her children die. Remus had lasted hours longer than anyone else. His lycanthropy kept healing him until he just hung there, unresponsive. Finally

someone shot the Killing Curse at him out of boredom.

The deaths had replayed themselves before Hermione's eyes so many time she would have thought that eventually the pain of them would ease.

It never did.

Each time felt just as sharp. Just as fresh.

A wound that would never heal.

Survivor's guilt, she thought, that was the Muggle term for it. Such a paltry description. It didn't capture even a fraction of the breadth of agony in her soul.

For Hermione, being bred by a Death Eater was a fate that had never even occurred to her. Being raped—the risk had been considered. This felt like rape in slow motion. However, the situation was far more complex than simply that. Whatever she had hidden in her mind, it had been important. More important to her than anything else. She couldn't let it fall into Voldemort's hands.

She wasn't afraid of having her corpse rot in the Great Hall. That fate was nothing compared to giving up what she was protecting. Or compared to being raped and forced to carry a child that would be torn from her the moment it was born.

Escaping, she realised, was likely a luxury she couldn't afford to pursue. The important thing would be to die quickly. Before she could be stopped and kept from further attempts.

She lay quietly in the bed and schemed.

The days passed slowly. None of the prisoners brought into the hospital wing dared speak to Hermione with the guards constantly beside her bed.

Healers arrived several times a day to appraise and treat her. They took vials of blood and a bit of hair away for analysis. A therapist arrived to treat Hermione for the torture. For the tremors.

Eventually most of the intermittent spasming stopped. Hermione's fingers still tended to twitch spastically at unexpected sounds.

She wasn't used to noise anymore. She remembered life being full of noise in the past; in classes, at meals, in the hospital ward after battles. Now any unexpected sound caught her off-guard. The banging of a door or clatter of boots, the sound waves from them—they felt like physical sensations on her flesh.

She'd twitch.

The nervous mind healer came frequently with Healer Stroud to examine Hermione's brain and psychological condition. There were concerns about her overall stability. They'd cast simulation spells on her brain to see how she'd react to crowds, tight spaces, physical contact, gore. If she was going to mentally snap, they wanted her to do it in the hospital wing.

Apparently, despite the twitching, Hermione was regarded as stable enough. When the most severe torture tremors stopped after four days of therapy, they decided she was ready for training. On the fifth day, she was released from the hospital wing. The guards took her straight to the Great Hall.

There were rows and rows of chairs arranged facing the front of the hall. The chairs were filled with women dressed in drab grey dresses.

Umbridge was standing on the platform in the front, speaking with saccharine cheer. She was dressed in a subdued shade of pink with a large pendant hanging from her neck. One of her hands was heavily bandaged.

“You have been chosen to help build the future that our Dark Lord has envisioned. You have been granted the privilege of bringing it forth,” she said, and simpered. “You are the few found worthy of it.”

Umbridge sounded mechanical, staring down at the girls with eyes glittering with hatred. The false smile plastered firmly across her face. Her eyes kept flickering up toward a corner of the room.

Hermione turned slightly to look and saw two Death Eaters standing there unmasked; Corban Yaxley and Thorfinn Rowle. They were watching Umbridge with expressions of bored amusement.

“The Dark Lord has commanded that you be trained in order to fulfill your duties without fail. This is a great honour he has bestowed upon you; you do not want to disappoint him. You are important to the Dark Lord. Because of that, you must be protected from others as well as from yourselves.”

Umbridge’s smile suddenly sharpened, showing a malicious edge. She gestured toward the back, and Yaxley and Rowle came forward. Umbridge turned to the prison guards lined up along a wall.

“Stun them all. Be thorough about it.” A few of the seated women cringed or tried to shy away, but most of them barely moved as guards started hexing them. The bodies slumped down in the chairs or fell forward onto the ground.

Hermione was standing toward the back. She watched the girls fall. She recognized a handful of them; Hannah Abbott, Parvati Patil, Angelina Johnson, Katie Bell, Cho Chang, and Romilda Vane. Hermione thought some of the others might have been in the older and younger years in Hogwarts. There were a few slightly older women too, although no one who appeared over thirty. There were nearly a hundred of them.

Umbridge saw Hermione standing toward the back.

“Stun her too,” Umbridge said, glaring venomously at Hermione.

They hesitated.

Healer Stroud appeared from the periphery of Hermione's vision.

“Do it,” she said with a sharp nod of approval.

Hermione was knocked out before she could brace herself.

“Rennervate.”

Hermione sat up groggily. She'd been moved, and found herself lying beside the rest of the girls.

They were laid out in rows. Some were still unconscious, and the guards went down the line waking them. Others were sitting, staring at the manacles around their wrists. Hermione looked down at her own. The magical bracelets looked different; a bit wider, and now without any clasp. A perfect

circle of copper wrapped around each wrist.

“Property of the High Reeve” was engraved into the shining surface of both of the manacles.

Of greater concern to Hermione was the cold object beneath the metal that she could feel pressing slightly against her inner wrists. The manacles were so closely-fitted she couldn’t peer under to discern what it was. It was clear—the reason they had been stunned was in order to remove and replace the manacles. Presumably with something worse than what they already had been.

The clock on the wall indicated that hours had passed since the stunning had started. Whatever the process had been, it had taken time.

A large table had appeared in the Great Hall, covered with weapons.

It couldn’t have been a more obvious trap.

Everyone stood cautiously and just stared. “Come forward,” Umbridge said in a coaxing voice, beckoning from beside the table. “Come on. Come see.”

No one moved.

Umbridge looked disappointed. She had clearly hoped someone would be foolish enough to rush toward the table and try arming themselves.

“You there. Come here.” Umbridge pointed at a girl in the crowd. Hermione thought the girl might have been in Hermione’s year. Mafalda, she thought, from Slytherin.

The girl obeyed slowly, cringing in apprehension.

“Lift something up,” Umbridge ordered her.

Mafalda reached forward slowly, but when her hand got within a few centimetres of a knife, she abruptly snatched it back with a cry.

Umbridge smiled in triumph.

“Everyone now, come reach. See what happens.”

The women all shuffled forward reluctantly. Hermione approached in growing dread, her mind speculating. There must have been a barrier charm added to the manacles; something that prevented them from getting close to certain objects.

She extended her hand from a considerable distance and approached slowly. When her fingers were within ten centimeters of a dagger on the table, a burning sensation began enveloping them. She pulled her hand away bitterly. Her options if she needed to resort to suicide were suddenly dramatically limited. She surveyed the various objects: crossbow bolts, knives, swords, axes, kitchen knives, letter openers, even large steel nails. The spellwork to create the punishing barrier appeared to have been comprehensive. She catalogued each item carefully.

That couldn’t be all the new manacles did. Inlaying a barrier charm was simple enough magic. There was something more complex about the new set. Hermione looked down and fidgeted them again.

“These new bracelets will keep you safe and ensure the households you are sent to can take good

care of you. The head of each household will carry a charm that allows them to always find you and know if you are ever in any danger. Given“—Umbridge smiled sweetly,—“the dangerous, volatile nature common among Muggles, they will keep you from committing any acts of violence on anyone, including yourselves. They will help you to unwaveringly obey the Dark Lord in this generous opportunity he has given you.”

Several women were audibly sobbing.

“These are such important wizards that you will be serving, after all. We don’t want any mistakes or accidents inconveniencing them.” A barrier charm, possibly some kind of compulsion spell, and paired with a monitor enchantment—that was what Hermione felt under the manacles—a monitor piece, tracking her physical well-being.

Monitor enchantments were commonly used in the psych wards of hospitals to alert healers when patients were likely to injure themselves or act out. It tracked heart rate and hormones, picking up spikes and surges. Complex ones even tapped slightly into the consciousness. It wasn’t mind reading exactly, but it gave an impression on the wearer’s state and inclinations.

Trying to commit suicide or escape without any type of weapon, trapped under a sort of compulsion spell, without any mental indication or spike in heart rate—it would be nearly impossible.

Hermione stood frozen in the Great Hall as she absorbed it.

The days merged together into a haze of dread.

They were trained.

Umbridge would hold what looked like a small lantern and issue an instruction. When she finished speaking, the lantern would glow slightly and the manacles would grow warm as magic sank in.

Ingraining compulsions into their minds.

It was done gradually. It seemed that each instruction needed time to take root in their psyches. To mould their behavior.

You will be quiet.

You will be obedient.

You will not hurt anyone.

You will not offend the wives.

You will not resist when bedded.

After being bedded you will not move for ten minutes.

You will do everything to get pregnant quickly and produce healthy children.

You will not have sex with any man but the one designated.

As the days passed, Hermione could see the effect of the instructions on the other women. They grew quieter and quieter. During the first few days, there were hushed whispers at night. By the third day, the rooms were mostly quiet aside from the muffled sobbing.

Hermione was kept slightly apart from all the others. There was always a guard flanking her. Umbridge stayed far away from Hermione, although her eyes would flash toward Hermione in triumph each time a new compulsion was laid.

Whatever the Dark magic being used to enable the compulsion spell was, it was delicate. With each new instruction, the healers would sweep in and run diagnostics over the girls.

One day, one of the girls abruptly snapped and stood up screaming. She seized her chair and whipped it up into the air before smashing it down onto the woman beside her. By the time the guards had stunned the screaming girl and dragged her away, the woman's shoulder was shattered.

There may have been further instructions planned, but after that event, Healer Stroud decided that what had been programmed with was sufficient.

Hermione lay in the dark each night and plotted.

If she couldn't escape, her best hope would be of dying at the wand-point of the High Reeve.

He was, from what Hermione had been able to gather, very quick to murder. If she could provoke him to act without thinking, he might kill her before he could stop himself.

If she—succeeded, Voldemort might then kill the High Reeve. Making the world a better place by far.

She would have to be quick about it. Clever. If he were as good a legilimens as Snape claimed, the High Reeve would find the intention in her mind.

Perhaps it wouldn't matter.

Someone so hate-filled—they were probably far quicker with their emotions than their reason. She could use that to her advantage and draw a noose around both their necks.

"Strip," Umbridge said several days later.

Hermione wasn't sure if it was the compulsion or merely the futility of resistance that caused her to obey automatically.

Probably both.

She, along with the rest of the women, unbuttoned her drab grey dress and pulled off her undergarments. They stood shivering in the cold room. There were seventy-two of them left. Twenty had been pulled by Healer Stroud out of concern they'd snap like the screaming girl had.

They all stood nude but for the shining copper bracelets on their wrists, folding in on themselves to hide their bodies from the leering appraisals of the guards.

"Dress in these." With a flick of her wrist Umbridge unfurled a large pile of clothing. Bright scarlet dresses and robes. Red as blood.

No undergarments. Hermione was thin enough that she barely missed having a bra but the lack of underwear was keenly felt. Like a raw nerve.

"And these, for the winter chill," Umbridge said, smirking, as she unfurled another pile of clothing. Wool thigh-high stockings.

Then Umbridge added a pile of white bonnets and scarlet, flat-soled shoes.

Hermione put everything on.

The bonnet was last. The wings of it blocked her peripheral vision almost entirely. Muffled her hearing.

She could only see straight ahead. If she wanted to look at anything to the left or right, she had to turn her head overtly.

It was all carefully crafted to engender vulnerability.

They could barely see, barely hear, couldn't resist, couldn't refuse, couldn't escape.

Their well-being would rely entirely upon endearing themselves to whomever owned them.

So they would be pliant.

"If you leave the home you have been assigned to, you are required to wear these bonnets. You are not to be looked at," Umbridge commanded. "This is the end of my training for you. I cannot wait to see the children brought forth."

Umbridge's eyes were locked on Hermione's face, the hatred in them so thick Hermione could almost feel it glazing on her skin. Umbridge smiled a cold, gleeful smile and then turned and left.

Someone brushed Hermione's arm. Someone so close that even turning she couldn't see who it was with the obscuring wings in the way.

"I'm so sorry," Angelina's voice whispered. Angelina's voice broke, like she was suppressing a sob. "You were right. We should have listened to you."

Hermione opened her mouth to ask Angelina what she meant. Before she could get the question out, a hard hand closed around her arm. She found herself dragged away into a small room.

Healer Stroud sat behind a large desk piled high with paperwork. She had a file laid open before her that appeared to feature a calendar. The squares were filled with checks to mark off the days. Hermione realised it was mid-November in 2004. She hadn't realised the date until that moment.

"Miss Granger," Healer Stroud said as she looked up, "I am quite pleased I was able to keep you in the program."

Hermione said nothing. She stared woodenly at the woman before her.

"I realise that you did not choose this, but given the side you chose in the war, surely you're pleased to have your magical abilities acknowledged." Stroud studied Hermione, her eyes bright and her expression strangely warm. "There will be no more Sacred Twenty-Eight after this. Future generations will simply be magical. I'm certain you can see the advantage to it." Hermione stood there, marveling internally at the twisted logic the woman before her employed to clear her conscience.

It took her several seconds to realise that a reply was in order. Judging by Stroud's expression, expected.

"You're sending me off to be raped and you want me to see the advantage to it?" she finally said,

arching her eyebrows up.

Healer Stroud's eyes flashed briefly and grew cold.

"I am not responsible for all the decisions regarding security. It may surprise you to hear it, but I am quite invested in your health and happiness."

"Even if I were sterile?"

Hermione looked down and studied the upside calendar, trying to read the numbers and ascertain the exact date. The bright white paper blurred in her vision and made her eyes ache.

Healer Stroud rolled her eyes and sighed. "Clearly there is no reasoning with you. You are still too emotional about everything. Perhaps someday, a witch with your intelligence will come to appreciate what I am trying to do."

Hermione said nothing. She squinted and tried to read the calendar again. Her fingers twitched.

Healer Stroud dropped a file on top of the dates and stood up. Hermione looked up.

"The Dark Lord is eager for you to be under the supervision of someone capable of monitoring your memories. I had requested an extension, in order to see how the training affects you, but you'll reach your window of fertility in a few days, and the Dark Lord wants you pregnant as soon as possible. I would have helped you prepare physically but—you don't seem to want my help. The High Reeve is married. I'm sure he knows what to do and won't mind training you to suit himself."

Healer Stroud gave a cold, thin smile and Hermione flinched. Her stomach twisted painfully. Healer Stroud reached into her drawer and pulled out a bag.

"This will take you to the High Reeve's estate. They're expecting you."

She reached toward Hermione. Hermione skittered back.

She dropped her chin down and tried to breathe. She just needed a moment to brace herself. To prepare for what she was about to face—and what she was about to do.

"Put out your hand," Healer Stroud said as she walked around the desk toward Hermione. Hermione's heart was pounding painfully in her chest as she bit her lip and tried to swallow the dread rising up in her like a tide.

Helpless. Defenseless. Obedient.

You will be obedient.

Hermione's hand began to raise itself. A coin fell onto her palm. Instantly she felt a tug behind her navel as she was whisked away.

Chapter 4

Hermione reappeared in a dark foyer. It was an immaculate, empty room. A black, lacquered, circular table sat in the center of the room. There was a large bouquet of white flowers on the table.

She turned slowly. She didn't want to miss any details, but the stupid wings of the bonnet acted like blinders. She could only see straight ahead.

A large stairway lay to the right. Cold hallways led into darkness and further into the house. It was a manor, and an enormous one based on the width of the staircase.

"Hello, Mudblood."

A cold voice made her freeze.

Slowly turning all the way around, she found Draco Malfoy.

He was older.

Her last memory of him was fifth year when he was on the Inquisitorial Squad. He had grown taller. He towered over her, and his face had lost every trace of boyishness. There was a dangerous, refined brutality in the way he held himself.

The way he looked at her...

His eyes were like a wolf's; cold and feral.

The deadliness in him was palpable. As he looked down at her, she felt certain, he could lean forward and cut her throat while staring in her eyes. Then step back, only caring that she not get blood on his shoes.

He was the High Reeve.

Voldemort's right hand. His executioner.

The number of her friends that he had murdered: Ginny, McGonagall, Moody, Neville, Dean, Seamus, Professor Sprout, Madam Pomfrey, Flitwick, Oliver Wood... the list went on and on. Aside from those who had been tortured to death immediately after the final battle—every person that she knew to be dead following the war—the High Reeve had killed them.

The girls had whispered to her during the first few nights. Telling her about the world of horror she had missed while locked under Hogwarts.

She hadn't thought he could be someone she knew. Someone so young.

Terror welled up inside her. She wasn't sure what to do to handle the shock.

Before she could react—or even process the realisation—his eyes locked into hers, and he abruptly slammed his way into her mind.

The force almost made her black out.

His mental intrusion was like a blade, driving straight into her memories. He sliced through the

fragile barrier that she tried to erect with the shreds of internal magic she could summon. He drilled into her blocked memories.

It was like having a nail driven into her head.

The precision and the unrelenting force.

He wouldn't stop trying to break through. It felt almost worse than the cruciatus curse. It lasted longer than the torture curse could without driving the recipient insane.

When he finally stopped, she found herself lying on the ground. Malfoy was standing over her, staring down at her as she shuddered from the trauma of his intrusion.

"So, you really have forgotten everything," he said as he appraised her. "What is it you think you're protecting in that brain of yours? You lost the war."

She couldn't answer.

She had no answer.

"Oh well," he said, straightening his robes slightly. "The Dark Lord was kind enough to send you to me. If ever you do recover your memories, I'll be the first to know."

He smirked down at her for a moment before his face grew cold and indifferent. Then he stepped over her body and walked out of the room.

Hermione dragged herself to her feet, shaking from the mental anguish and impotent rage she felt.

She hated him.

She had never hated Draco Malfoy before.

He had simply been an indoctrinated bully, a symptom of a disease which others were responsible for. Now—she hated him. For what he had become. For what he had done.

He owned her.

She was trapped under his heel, and he intended to grind her down until he had what he wanted. She clenched her jaw as she forced herself to think past her sudden rage. Her plan remained the same. She had to find a way to escape or trick him into killing her.

He wasn't what she expected. She had hoped that the High Reeve would be driven by emotions, and although the Malfoy she had known in school had been, now he seemed ice-cold.

Which, of course, she should have realised. Legilimency, occlumency; the key to them was control. The ability to compartmentalise one's self behind walls.

It would take cunning to make him snap enough to make a mistake like killing her. Whatever she did, she wouldn't be able to accomplish it immediately. She couldn't rush it. She couldn't be careless. She would have to stay there, wait, and endure what was to come until she found an opening.

The thought had her shuddering. Her throat felt tight as she swallowed and tried to think.

A click of heels on the wood floor drew her attention. A petite blonde witch swept into the room.

She and Hermione stared at each other for several long moments.

“So, you’re it,” the witch said, elevating her nose with a sniff. “Take that stupid hat off and come along. We have to review the instructions all together before I can put you away where we’re to keep you.”

The blonde turned on her heel and marched back out of the room. Hermione followed slowly. The witch was familiar. A Greengrass, Hermione thought. Not Daphne, but maybe the younger sister.

Hermione couldn’t remember her name.

They arrived in a drawing room. Malfoy was already there, reclining in a spindly looking chair and looking bored.

Hermione pulled the bonnet off.

“So,” said the witch Hermione assumed must be Malfoy’s wife as she seated herself on one of the other spindly chairs. “Healer Stroud sent over a package of instructions. Who knew Mudbloods came with directions? So convenient, isn’t it?”

The sarcasm in the witch’s sharp little voice was brittle.

“Just read it, Astoria,” Malfoy said, glancing briefly toward the witch with a sneer.

Astoria. So that was the name of Malfoy’s wife.

“Let’s see. No cursing or torturing or physically abusing her. She’s to be kept fed. We can make her work, but no more than six hours a day. And she’s to spend at least an hour outside each day.”

Astoria laughed somewhat manically. “It’s rather like keeping crups, isn’t it? Who knew? Ah yes. How delightful. We’ll get an owl every month on the five days you’re required to—perform, Draco. Healer Stroud has included a little personal note here, mentioning that due to the Dark Lord’s specific interest in the Malfoy Family and the Mudblood, she will be coming in person every month to see whether you’re successful.”

Astoria looked so nearly hysterical that Hermione was surprised she hadn’t started screaming and smashing a chair.

“Listen to this. I’m allowed to watch! You know, to make sure everything is entirely clinical between you and the Mudblood.”

Astoria turned shockingly pale. Her blue eyes looked almost deranged. Her hands were shaking, and she crumpled up the papers in her hands and smacked them down on the tea table.

“I will not,” she said, her voice razor-edged and vibrating. “If you object, you can drag me in front of the Dark Lord himself before you Avada me. I will not watch!”

She did scream the last bit.

“Do what you wish, just shut up!” Malfoy said, his tone vicious as he stood up and strode from the room.

Hermione stood frozen near the wall. Astoria sat shaking in her chair for several minutes before she spoke to Hermione.

“My mother bred crups. Pretty little things,“ Astoria said. “Such fun to see it done now with wizards.”

Hermione said nothing. She just stood by the wall trying not to move. Willing her fingers not to spasm. I am pretending to be a tree, she thought faintly to herself.

Finally Astoria stood up.

“I’ll show you your room. You can do whatever you want, but I don’t want to see you. I understand that those bracelets you have keep you from any trouble.”

They went down a long hallway and then through a narrow, partly concealed door that led to a winding servant’s stairway. After ascending three floors, they re-entered into a larger, main hallway of the house. They were in a different wing. The windows were all heavily draped. It was cold and shrouded; the furniture all covered with white dust sheets.

“This wing is unoccupied,” Astoria said as though it weren’t obvious. “We have more servants than we need. Stay here and out of sight unless you’re called for. The portraits will keep an eye on you.”

Astoria pushed open a door. Hermione walked in. It was a large bedroom. A canopied bed sat in the center and a single wing-backed chair near the window. A large wardrobe sat against one wall. There was no rug. A portrait hung on the wall. No books.

Everything was cold and bare.

“If you need anything, call a house-elf,” Astoria said before pulling the door shut. Hermione listened to her retreating footsteps.

Being suddenly left unsupervised without being in a cell felt disorienting. The sudden change simultaneously thrilling and terrifying, as though she’d suddenly jumped off a cliff.

She dropped her bonnet on the floor next to the door and walked over to a window. The cold, wintry countryside stretched out as far as she could see. As she took it in, she considered the situation.

Malfoy and Astoria clearly disliked each other.

It was hardly surprising. As if pure-blood arranged marriages weren’t already dysfunctional enough, having them arranged by Voldemort for the sole purpose of reproduction had to have smothered any potential spark. Especially after they failed to reproduce.

Astoria did not seem particularly afraid of Malfoy, so presumably he wasn’t so short-tempered as to be violent to her. She seemed largely resentful of and indifferent to him.

He did not appear to be an attentive husband by any stretch of the imagination. His regard for Astoria seemed to be along the lines of finding her to be a pest he was obliged to endure.

Whatever Astoria may feel about her husband or marriage, Hermione’s presence as a surrogate clearly stung. She seemed determined to ignore Hermione’s existence inasmuch as she possibly could.

Hermione had no objection. The fewer players she had to worry about, the better. If she had to worry about fending off or appeasing Astoria it would be an additional challenge. If Astoria were attentive to her husband, it would make escaping or finding a way to manipulate Malfoy far more

challenging. If Astoria was primarily preoccupied by pretending Hermione didn't exist, it was the easiest scenario. Hermione would keep out of sight, in the shadows, as much as she could. Until there was an opportunity to act.

The key would be to study Malfoy. Discover what drove him. What his vices were. What she could exploit in him.

He didn't seem particularly interested in Hermione beyond finding out what she might be concealing in her lost memories. If that were the case, it was a relief. Perhaps he would also primarily choose to leave her alone. She was sure that if he wished to he could come up with any number of ways to torture her without risking her fertility.

Draco Malfoy was the High Reeve.

It was still shocking.

What had happened to him during the war to make him so ruthless? The hatred required to successfully cast a Killing Curse was tremendous. To inflict instant death tore something out of you. Most dark wizards and witches could only manage it occasionally. That was part of why there were so many other curses used to kill. Sadism factored into it, but the truth was that no other curse was irreversible and unstoppable the way the Killing Curse was. The power necessary to utilise something so final was—well, there was really nothing to compare it to.

Voldemort's ability to cast it repeatedly and unfailingly was part of the reason he inspired such terror.

The High Reeve's reputation for using the curse was already equally legendary. It had vaulted him into the highest rank of the Death Eaters.

And it was Malfoy.

She would have to move carefully. The casualness with which the Malfoys had treated her arrival indicated utter assurance. Leaving her in the foyer. Showing her through the house. Putting her into an unoccupied wing. Hermione was certain there were no easy ways to escape. Until she could get the manacles off, Malfoy would always be able to find her, and she'd be incapable of fighting off him or anyone else.

She sighed, and her breath made a small circle of condensation on the cold glass of the windowpane.

Lifting a fingertip to the glass, she drew the rune thurisaz: for defense, introspection, and focus. Beside it she drew its reversal, its merkstave: for danger, defenselessness, malice, hatred, and spite.

What she needed. What she had.

She had to reverse her fortune.

She watched the runes fade away from the glass as the condensation evaporated back into the room.

None of the girls had heard any whispers about the Resistance still existing. Aside from Hermione, all of the Order members who survived the final battle were known to be dead. Their deaths publicly witnessed. Their corpses hung up to ensure there was no room for secret hopes. The Resistance had crumbled upon Harry's death.

Voldemort appeared to have been careful about ensuring that the Order of the Phoenix had no spark with which to resurrect itself. As the war had dragged on over the years, he had grown more cautious and less certain about his infallibility than he had been during Hermione's years in Hogwarts.

Voldemort was thorough.

That was troubling. If he had elevated Malfoy to High Reeve, it probably meant that Malfoy was also thorough. Not someone inclined to make mistakes or errors in judgment. Maybe there was still a Resistance somewhere. The women at Hogwarts had only known what the guards told them. There might still be some factions working against Voldemort. If Hermione escaped, maybe she could find them and eventually give them whatever secret she was hiding.

Since she was in the High Reeve's house, perhaps if she were clever she'd be able to glean useful information.

If she kept acting pliant and cooperative.

Broken.

If they thought she was truly broken, they might eventually become careless around her.

She would be waiting for it.

She was very good at waiting.

Chapter 5

Hermione explored the room she had been placed in. There was little to it that hadn't immediately met the eye.

The wardrobe was filled with more of the same scarlet dresses and robes that she was currently wearing. They were in various weights, presumably for summer and winter weather. The drawers held more bonnets and woolen stockings. More flimsy red shoes.

Hermione pulled a pair out of the drawer and stared at them. The soles were thin, and they were fabric; they would wear through rapidly. If she wanted to run, she'd have to steal new clothes and shoes.

The portrait on the wall was of a young witch. Pretty and blonde. Undoubtedly one of Malfoy's ancestors. She had the same sharp features and disdainful expression. The witch couldn't have been more than just graduated from Hogwarts when she was painted. She stared indifferently at Hermione, seated casually in a high backed chair, a book beside her.

Eventually Hermione turned away and surveyed the rest of the room. There was a door designed to blend into the wall across the room. She went over and opened it.

A bathroom, primarily occupied by a large claw-foot tub. No shower. Nothing but the most essential objects were provided: soap, towels, a toothbrush, a small cup for water.

Hermione walked over and washed her hands. As she withdrew them, she pretended to accidentally knock the cup off the counter. It hit the ground with a loud, sharp sound but failed to break or even crack.

There was a protection charm on it.

Malfoy *was* thorough.

She picked it up and rinsed it before replacing it. As she turned, she found that there was a portrait in the bathroom as well. The same young witch stood studying Hermione with a knowing look.

Hermione feigned innocence and walked back into the bedroom.

Within an hour, there was nothing left to possibly inspect in her room. Not that Hermione expected she could find anything or get into much trouble with the piercing supervision of the portrait on the wall. The witch had been apparently ordered to watch Hermione like a hawk.

Hermione went to the door of the bedroom, and, after a moment's hesitation, she turned the knob and walked into the hallway. Her heart immediately began pounding.

The sense of terror and freedom that she experienced by merely walking into another room by herself was staggering. As she pulled the door shut behind herself, she leaned against the door and tried to take a slow breath.

Her fingers twitched around the doorknob as she glanced around and tried to compose herself.

The long hallway that vanished into darkness felt so—open. She swallowed nervously. She had

assumed some effects of her long imprisonment would continue to haunt her. Actually experiencing it was more than unsettling. It was horrifying.

Her attempts to breathe and calm down were failing. Her chest stuttered in tiny, rapid inhalations.

The only sound in the cold, dark wing of the manor.

She bit her lip. Her mind—she had always been able to trust her mind. Even her locked memories felt like a defense mechanism. Finding herself panicking and hyperventilating because she had walked into a hallway of her own volition—

This was a betrayal.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to breathe evenly. Tried to pull her hand free from the doorknob she was clutching desperately, as though she would drown if she let go of it.

Her ability to reason and tell herself she was alright was insufficient persuasion to her mind and body.

She tried to make herself take a step away from the door, but her legs refused to cooperate.

The terror coursing through her body had her frozen.

It was a hallway. Just a hallway, she told herself. She was allowed to be there. There were no commands holding her back—

There were no commands holding her back...

...just herself.

After standing there for several minutes, trying and failing to force herself to move, she abruptly sobbed and huddled closer to the door.

She couldn’t remember the last time she had cried. Long ago in her cell.

As she stood there shaking and hyperventilating in the hallway of that empty wing of the manor, she cried. Over everyone who was dead now. For everyone Malfoy had killed. For all the girls back at Hogwarts being sent out into a world of horror. Out of rage over the manacles locked around her wrists, and the manacles she found she had somehow locked around her own mind.

She went back into her room, closed the door, sank onto the floor and kept crying.

It took her a full day before she could force herself into the hallway again.

She was determined to make herself overcome the panic. The next morning, she opened the door wide, crouched on the bed, and made herself stare at the hallway until her heart stopped pounding painfully in her chest from the mere sight.

She would lose all chance of escape if she couldn’t even walk out of her room without having a mental breakdown.

She sat in bed and ate the breakfast that appeared while she contemplated the problem.

It had manifested when she was alone. She wasn’t sure if it was because the manacles’ compulsion to be obedient had previously distracted her from it or if it were an insidious form of mental trauma;

that being imprisoned for so long had damaged her to the point that being controlled by others was the only way she knew how to function now.

She hoped it was simply the manacles, but she feared it was the latter. Imprisonment had eaten away at her psyche in ways she felt afraid of fully realising.

She steeled herself. She was determined to overcome it. Whatever it took.

When her dinner appeared that evening, she made herself eat it while sitting by the open door. Her hands shook so much she dropped half the food from the fork. By the time she finished eating, the trembling in them had eased enough that she could drink water without spilling it down her front.

She stared down the hallway. She stared at all the shrouded furniture and the many portraits of cold faced, pale, aristocrats.

She tried to remember what she knew of Malfoy.

How had he managed to climb so high in Voldemort's ranks at such a young age?

He—had been involved in Dumbledore's death at the beginning of sixth year. The circumstances of that had never been entirely clear. She remembered being awakened abruptly by the castle's screaming wards during the aftermath. Minerva McGonagall and the rest of the professors had been pale with shock and horror as they frantically tried to discover what had happened. Malfoy vanished in the chaos.

It was the first and last major event of the war that Hermione associated specifically with Malfoy. After that he disappeared into Voldemort's ranks. Another faceless Death Eater.

His mother had died several years into the war. Hermione remembered hearing about Narcissa Malfoy's death in Lestrange Manor. It had happened during a rescue mission. Harry and Ron had been caught by Snatchers. When the Order went to rescue them, a Death Eater lost control of a fiendfyre curse and burned down the manor with Narcissa and Bellatrix inside it.

Narcissa's death had driven Lucius Malfoy insane. He had slid easily into Bellatrix's vacated shoes of madness. He'd placed the blame for Narcissa's death squarely on Ron and Harry and devoted himself to avenging her by hunting down the Weasleys. Arthur Weasley's brain damage and the near death of George during the war had both been caused by Lucius. He became a loose cannon within Voldemort's ranks. He'd been too useful and deadly for his insubordination to get him killed, but he'd constantly danced on the line.

It had occurred to Hermione that Lucius might be the High Reeve, given how vicious, hate-filled, and quick to murder he was. Since he wasn't, Hermione wondered if he was still alive. Perhaps following the war he had finally overstepped and gotten himself killed. Hermione hoped so. The way Lucius had laughed while Ron died screaming in agony—Hermione would never banish the memory.

But Malfoy…

She didn't think he'd been treated as particularly important or considered a significant Death Eater during the Order meetings she recalled. Whatever he'd done to claw his way to the very top must have occurred toward the end of the war. Perhaps he had been involved with whatever caused the Order's plans during the final battle to fall apart. Because she'd been a healer, Hermione hadn't

been there for the entire battle. Something in their strategy had gone wrong. There had been far more Death Eaters than the Order had anticipated. Voldemort had cast a killing curse and Harry had fallen. Then he had commanded Lucius to confirm Harry was dead.

Harry hadn't been dead.

So Voldemort cast another killing curse, and another, and another, and another. After half a dozen killing curses, Voldemort had gone and confirmed for himself that Harry was dead. For insurance, he had Harry's body dragged up into the air and hung from the Astronomy Tower. Everyone watched as Voldemort cursed Harry's body with a fast acting necrosis curse and the entire thing rotted away before their eyes.

Harry's blank green eyes—Hermione saw them every time she closed her own. The expression on his face; the realisation he had failed had been written into it in death.

Hermione shook as she thought about it.

Her best friends had died before her eyes. By some extra cruel twist of fate she hadn't been allowed to follow them.

They had left her behind.

She squared her shoulders and forced herself to step into the hallway. She had faced all manner of horror. She wasn't going to be defeated by her own fractured psyche and a hallway. One step.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Her breathing grew fainter, and she clenched her hands into fists until she could feel her nails sinking into the skin.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

She froze and looked down. One of her hands was dripping blood into a trail on the floor.

It was the same shade as her dress.

She stared down at it until a puddle the size of a knut gradually collected by her feet.

Then she continued down the hall. She counted the dripping sounds instead of her footsteps until she reached the end.

She had no destination in mind, so she turned around and started back, trying the knobs of doors along the way. Some were locked. Others weren't. She peeked into more empty bedrooms filled with shrouded furniture. She would return and explore them all carefully later. Perhaps something that might prove useful would be found in them.

She was shaking as she re-entered her room. Feeling drained, she immediately crawled into bed.

As she fell asleep, she dreamed of Ginny.

Ginny—from near the end of the war, with hair cut above her shoulders and a long cruel scar down one side of her face. She was huddled next to a bed and looked up sharply at Hermione as though startled.

Ginny's expression was twisted in anguish, covered in tears. She was sobbing uncontrollably.

"Ginny," Hermione heard herself say. *"Ginny, what's wrong? What happened?"*

As Ginny opened her mouth to answer, the dream faded away.

When Hermione woke the next morning, she knew she must have been dreaming. What had she been dreaming about? She couldn't remember. Something—something sad. She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes and tried to remember it. She couldn't bring herself to go near the door that day. She huddled by the window and looked out at the misty gardens that lay outside. There was a hedge maze to one side. She traced her way through it with her eyes.

She studied all the grounds of the estate that she could see. Trying to take note of anything that could be useful. Where would she go if she were trying to hide? If she were trying to escape?

The day passed slowly.

Having a sense of time once again was vaguely unsettling. The steady ticking of the clock constantly caught her attention. A continuous grating sound. If she let herself listen to it for long, it made her fingers begin to spasm with each click of the gears.

She found that her mind had a tendency toward wandering and losing itself. She would interrupt herself from some odd thought and realise hours had passed.

As the day drew to a close, she stared at the door.

She should make herself go out again. She hadn't even seen Malfoy since she'd arrived. She had intended to try to watch him. Study him. Arm herself with some kind of understanding of him.

All those plans had faded away during the last two days.

She stood up and moved slowly towards the door. As she was wrapping her fingers around the knob, there was a sudden pop behind her. Starting, she turned sharply and found a house-elf standing behind her.

"You is to get ready for tonight, mistress is sayin," the elf said, averting its eyes and then popping away.

Hermione felt as though her heart were in her throat. Her hands started trembling.

She considered for a moment not readying herself.

Undoubtedly, if she did, Malfoy would appear and force her to. Who knew what else he might do to her if she provoked him. The compulsions in her mind stirred... *Obedient.*

Not to resist.

Her brain automatically began cataloguing the things she had been instructed to do.

She wasn't sure if the compulsion made her rationalise obeying or if obeying actually was the rational choice.

She went into the bathroom and turned on the tap in the bath. The scalding water poured out and she watched the tub slowly fill. She wondered if she could somehow drown herself before Malfoy could get there. As Lord of the manor, he could probably apparate anywhere. She shuddered at the thought of having him drag her, naked, out of the water by her hair.

She pulled off her robes and sank into the water, hissing but relishing the pain. She hardly felt anything nowadays. Apparently the manacles didn't restrict her from heat.

That was a useful piece of information to file away.

After she had washed, she dried herself with a lavish, oversized bath towel. Then she pulled on a fresh set of robes. The long, scarlet, buttoned dress, and then the open scarlet robe. Then she pulled on the stockings. She hated them so much. If it weren't freezing inside the manor, she would never have worn them. Aside from the dreadful red colour, she could almost pretend the robes were just clothing, but the horrid, crotchless-ness left her feeling constantly exposed.

She would only get knickers if she was bleeding or pregnant. Otherwise, she was to remain—accessible.

When she was dressed, she stood uncertainly in the middle of her room. She wasn't sure where she was supposed to go. What she was supposed to do.

The door abruptly swung open, and Astoria appeared, looking white as a sheet.

"Good, you're ready. I was afraid I'd have to send Draco to drag you," Astoria said as she glanced up and down Hermione with a critical expression. "I'll show you where to go tonight. After this, I shall be elsewhere. I'll expect you to prepare and go there every designated night without issue. I was realising… you really don't need all the body parts you have just in order to reproduce. So if you're thinking of causing problems—keep that in mind."

A chill ran down Hermione's spine, and she nodded.

Astoria swept from the room, leading Hermione through the house, out into the foyer, and then up the large staircase and down a second floor hallway. The portraits muttered as they passed.

"Whore."

Hermione heard it murmured more than once.

Astoria stopped at the seventh door.

"Go in and wait. Draco will come when he chooses, but you're to be in there at eight o'clock sharp."

Without pausing further, Astoria continued down the hallway and disappeared into the darkness. Hermione's hands were trembling as she grasped the door knob and tried to open it. It wouldn't turn at first, and she had to take several deep breaths to calm herself and make her hands stop shaking enough to grasp and turn it.

Stepping into the room, she took in every detail she could.

It felt sterile.

She had assumed her room was bare and cold out of indifference, but perhaps it was simply the way Malfoy was. There was a large bed, towering wardrobe, a desk and a chair.

Hermione would have imagined Malfoy as having a more luxurious room. All green and silver with expensive sheets and throw pillows covered with too many tassels.

The room before her could have belonged to a monk.

It was functional. That was really all that could be said about it. No wonder Malfoy was so cold.

She shied away from the bed and went over to the chair by the desk. Sitting down, she looked over the contents of the desk's surface. Blank parchment and quills. She held her hand out hesitantly toward the quills, wondering if she was able to touch them.

As her fingers got close, she felt a faint burning sensation and pulled her hand back.

Her stomach was twisting itself with dread, and she tried to distract herself by reciting arithmancy formulas while she sat there.

She was used to waiting endlessly. What was an hour after sixteen months of sensory deprivation? She just needed to stop thinking about what was about to happen next. Her stomach felt so twisted she thought she might be sick.

Suddenly, the door clicked. She stood and turned sharply in time to see Malfoy stride in. His hand was up at his throat, pulling his collar loose. He clearly had not expected to find her there. He stopped abruptly and stared at her, actually seeming to pale slightly before pressing his lips together into a hard line.

"Mudblood," he said, after a moment. "Today is the day, I see."

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter features rape. I have done my best to depict it in a manner that is not unnecessarily graphic but I have also tried to be realistic about the impact of such a thing. I will not be repeatedly featuring such scenes in this work but it is an overarching element of this story and I did not think it would be honest to gloss over it. Reader discretion is advised.

Hermione didn't say anything. She just looked at him.

She was relieved she wasn't trembling.

She forced herself to meet his gaze, reminding herself she just had to endure for a little while —just until she could formulate a plan.

She could endure it. She would.

She was uncertain of what she was supposed to do. Was he expecting her to go lie down on his bed?

He strode past her to the wardrobe and after laying his hand against the door for a moment, jerked it open.

Perhaps Malfoy was not entirely monk-like. The wardrobe had almost an entire room within it. The door held a full bar, and Malfoy snatched a bottle of firewhiskey off a shelf and pulled the cork out with his teeth. Spitting the cork onto the floor, he raised the bottle to his lips and stared at her.

Hermione just waited.

After a minute, he drew his wand and with a quick movement conjured a table in the middle of the floor. Hermione stared at it, completely at a loss. She looked over to Malfoy.

He sneered at her.

"Bend over," he said in a low, taunting voice, gesturing toward it.

Hermione hadn't thought she could feel any more revulsed by him, but apparently she could. She bit down on the inside of her lip until she felt the skin give away and blood flood over her tongue as she felt her feet begin to obey automatically. She walked slowly over and after hesitating for a moment, leaned across the table.

The wood bit into her hip bones. She rested her hands against the edges and gripped them until her knuckles cracked from the force. She fought to keep from trembling. Her whole body felt on edge from the intensity of her vulnerability. Her ears were straining to detect any sound.

There was a pause. Then she heard Malfoy approach her slowly.

He stopped directly behind her and there was another silence. She could feel his eyes on her.

The air shifted.

"Are you still a virgin, Mudblood? Is that something you even remember?" She flinched as she

realised she didn’t know.

He stepped closer. “I’m sure Weasley or Potter climbed up there at some point.” She could hear the mockery in his tone.

His hand rested briefly on the small of her back as he pulled her skirts up to her waist. She felt the cold air of his room against her skin. She was shaking so hard the table was rattling.

“Well, I suppose we’ll know soon enough,” he said and then commanded, “Move your feet wider.”

She forced herself to shift.

She felt his fingers on her and jerked away slightly.

He muttered under his breath and she felt something warm and liquid inside her. A lubrication charm. She started so abruptly the table legs shrieked as they dragged across the wood floor.

“We can’t have any damage or infections impairing your—usefulness,” he explained in a derisive tone.

She heard his belt click and then, without warning, he impaled her with himself.

She tried to bite back the sob that forced its way up her throat but the abrupt invasion caught her off guard. At her cry, he froze, just for a moment, before he started moving again. Aside from where they were joined, he didn’t touch her. His right hand gripped the table near where her face was turned. She could see a black ring on his hand, glittering faintly.

When he came, his movement grew uneven and rougher, and then he stilled suddenly with a quiet hiss.

He stayed there for only a second before jerking away from her and striding back over to the bar. “Get out.” His tone was sharp.

Hermione shook.

“I can’t.” She tried not to sob as she said it, but her voice trembled. “I’m not allowed to move for ten minutes after.”

He snarled with rage. Suddenly the table beneath her vanished, and she plummeted to the floor, hitting her forehead sharply on the ground.

“GET OUT!”

The room shook.

Pushing herself up, she fled. Stumbling dazedly through the hallway. Trying to remember the way back.

Her chest was stuttering as she tried not to hyperventilate. She couldn’t see clearly. She reached up to find that her forehead had split where she’d hit it. Blood was streaming down into her eyes.

She stood at the top of the stairs. Trying to remember the way back. Blood was filling her eyes. She could feel fluid seeping out from between her legs and trickling down her thighs. She was shaking. Trying to remember where her room was. If she stayed there—Astoria would find her and gouge her

eyes out, or chop off her fingers, or pull her teeth out.

She stumbled and almost fell down the stairs.

She was drawing short, rapid breaths as she tried to keep from sobbing aloud.

She couldn't understand—she'd survived the war. She'd watched her friends die in front of her. She'd stayed sane, alone in a dark cell for over a year. But—being forced to be complicit in her own rape. She couldn't bear it. Not while knowing she'd be expected to do it again the next day. And the next. And the day after that.

She stared dizzily down at the foyer.

If she just threw herself over the balcony Malfoy couldn't stop her.

She'd be done.

She leaned over and looked down at the table in the foyer. Just a little further—

A vise-like grip closed itself around her arm and wrenched her away.

She turned and found Malfoy glaring at her, enraged.

"Don't—you—dare." He snarled the words. His face white with fury. "Please, Malfoy—" She was sobbing. "Please—"

He dragged her down the stairs and through the house as she cried. He practically kicked the door of her room in as he dragged her into it and shoved her onto the bed.

"Evanesco!" he snapped, pointing his wand at her face, and suddenly the blood in her eyes vanished. He followed it with a healing charm and just stood there staring at her with unveiled fury.

"Do you really think I won't know when you try to kill yourself, Mudblood?" he finally asked after she stopped sobbing.

"Just let me," she said. Her voice was wooden, her chest kept stuttering, "I'm sure they'll give you a new Mudblood to breed. You hate me too, Malfoy. Do you really want me to be the mother of your children? To see my face in them? I'm sure you can come up with a compelling excuse for killing me."

Malfoy gave a barking laugh.

"If it were only so easy, I'd kill you now. For the first time in your life, you appear to have underestimated your value. The Dark Lord is quite anxious to see what kind of offspring we'll produce. Once you've birthed a few heirs for me, he intends to send you on and see what kind you'll make with some of the other old wizarding families. You little broodmares are quite the commodity. The Dark Lord has a whole breeding program planned—spanning several generations."

Hermione stared in horror.

He moved closer, his expression menacing. "Let's not forget about those memories of yours. The fact that there was something you considered worth hiding even after losing the war is a cause for concern. Until I know why, you will not die. However, how much freedom you have in this house—and how often I have to supervise you in order to assure it—your little suicide

contemplations will decide that."

Hermione sat there frozen. Somehow she'd assumed that Malfoy would be the end for her. That he'd force a child from her, and then she'd be disposed of. It hadn't occurred to her that she was intended to go on from one wizarding family after another until her body gave out.

Malfoy glanced around her room and then back to her. His face was tense, and his eyes steely.

"Well," he said, sighing, "I hadn't intended to do this immediately after fucking you the first time—but I am already here and with no further plans for the evening. There really is no time like the present. Let's see exactly what is going on in that little Mudblood mind of yours. How many other ideas do you have?"

Before she could cringe away, he used his wand tip to force her chin up, and his cold, grey eyes sank into her consciousness. He didn't bother with her locked memories. He went to directly after the war, to her imprisonment, and moved forward from there.

Hermione didn't struggle. If she tried to push him out, it would just hurt more, and he would still force his way through. She collapsed onto the bed as the weight of his mind bore into hers.

Her fingers twitched involuntary, but she was otherwise still.

He slipped quickly through all the long, silent, isolated months and then moved slowly once she was dragged out of the cell, tortured, petrified, and then re-tortured by not being stunned when mobilised again. He took note of her conversation with Hannah and the mind healer's description of Hermione's condition. He observed the techniques Voldemort and Snape had used to try to break into her locked memories. He was particularly interested in her scheming to kill herself or escape. She could feel his condescending amusement at who she had theorised the High Reeve could be; how she had wondered if she could take advantage of him and get him killed.

Hermione couldn't find a way to wrench the thoughts away from him or conceal them. Every time she was able to gather more than a shred of magic, she felt the copper of the manacles key in and snatch it away.

He paid careful attention to the manacles. The compulsions that had been laid. The screaming girl who snapped and nearly bludgeoned someone to death. To Hermione's arrival at the manor and reaction upon seeing him. To her theories regarding himself and Astoria. Then her careful exploration of her room and panic attacks when she tried to step into the hallway.

It took hours.

He pored over every detail. All the twists, doubts, questions and theories in her mind. Finally, when he reached her memory of Astoria sweeping into the bedroom to retrieve her that evening, he withdrew. He was apparently disinterested by the notion of witnessing her perspective of being raped by him.

Hermione felt as though her skull had been crushed. She barely even twitched as he stood staring down at her.

"So many schemes," he said as he straightened and tilted his head back, appraising her with cold, mocking eyes. "Then again, I'd feel disappointed if you weren't entertaining at least one plot to try to kill me and escape. I can't wait to see what you'll come up with next."

He leaned over the bed until his cruel face was only a breath away from hers. “Do you really think you can trick me into killing you?”

Hermione dragged her eyes away from his face and stared up at the canopy.

“Do feel free to try,” he said with a smirk, “just as soon as you can bring yourself to walk through that door by yourself." Then he straightened again, and all the humour vanished from his face.

“Stay out of my room. I don’t want to find you in there again. I’ll come do it here.”

He sneered at her. “I’ll have a table sent, so you’ll know when to expect me.”

He turned on his heel and strode out without another word.

Hermione didn’t move.

Not when the door clicked shut.

Not as the hands on the clock ticked unrelentingly on and on, indicating that it was past three in the morning.

Not when she became conscious of the crusting sensation on her thighs, the faint rawness between her legs, and the unfamiliar ache in her lower abdomen.

She just lay there.

Once upon a time… there had been a girl who fought. Who believed that books and cleverness and friendship and bravery could overcome all things.

But now—

—that girl was gone.

She’d been all but killed during the war.

Now—Draco Malfoy had stomped that girl to dust over the course of an evening.

He’d physically and mentally raped every last shred of that girl to death.

Hermione lay and stared up at the canopy of the bed.

She hadn’t laid much store in her plans. She’d known her odds were impossibly small. Now —Malfoy’s mockery had sealed the sense of defeat that she felt.

She didn’t move.

When morning came, she didn’t wake. It was late in the afternoon before she finally dragged herself from the bed and into a bath.

Malfoy had barely touched her, but she scrubbed every inch of herself in an attempt to excise any trace of him.

In the process, she discovered a thin raised scar on her rib cage that she couldn’t remember getting, as well as faint clusters of scars mottling her left wrist and upper chest. She inspected them all carefully but drew a complete blank as to how or when she had received them. She didn’t think

she'd been injured much during the final battle. She hadn't been in any raids or skirmishes for several years prior to the war ending.

As she examined her wrist again, she reviewed in her mind all the curses she knew of that might cause such scarring. It was such a long list. Voldemort had created a division in his army specifically devoted to developing new curses. Hermione couldn't remember a battle that hadn't had multiple casualties simply because she couldn't identify all the new curses fast enough to counteract them.

The water grew cold around her, but she didn't leave until she started shivering. When she went back into the bedroom, she found that lunch had been left for her. She picked listlessly at it.

She went to the door and stood trembling in front of it for several minutes before turning away.

She stared at the cold, misty Wiltshire landscape outside her window. Pressing her forehead against the glass, she relished the sharp, icy pain that sank into her skin. She wished it would sink in far enough to numb her mentally.

She didn't know what to do but make more futile plans.

There was nothing else to do. No books to read. Nothing to occupy her mind but all those spells, and arithmancy problems, and potion recipes that she had already recited to herself a thousand times.

She hadn't realised the comforting oblivion that came from not seeing and barely hearing in a timeless nowhere. Standing out in the real world again was a keener sense of despair than even her eventual acceptance of her cell. Realising how reduced she'd become. How powerless she was to fight her circumstances. Finding that no book she'd studied nor spell she'd learned offered any solutions for her circumstances...

She didn't know how to rise above it.

She didn't even know how to get through it.

She just wanted to die.

Even that felt utterly unattainable.

The table appeared in her room at precisely 7:30 that evening.

She'd bathed only a few hours before, so she just stared at it. Bracing herself. Considering.

It was at least—impersonal.

As humiliating and horrifying as it was. At least she didn't have to look at Malfoy when he did it. Didn't have to touch him.

She didn't want to see him. A minute before eight o'clock, she went over and leaned across the table. She set her feet wide and turned her face so she could watch the clock.

When the door clicked she didn't move.

Malfoy didn't say a word. He walked over and paused behind her. Hermione's hands began trembling, but she refused to let herself move. She wouldn't look at him.

She squeezed her eyes shut and began to recite healing spells; the longest, most complex ones she knew. Rehearsing the wand movement in her mind.

Her skirts were pulled up, and she felt the trembling in her hands spread throughout the rest of her body.

She heard the muttered charm. Warmth and liquid.

She gritted her teeth as she felt prodding between her legs.

When he sank inside her, she shook but didn't cry.

When he started to move, she cast her mind for something—something new. Something she hadn't already thought to death.

The lines of a poem slowly came to her.

"I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,

And Mourners to and fro"

The continuous sensation of movement inside her dragged her attention back into reality. She ground her teeth and fought for the next lines. She started over.

"I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,

And Mourners to and fro

Kept treading - treading - till it seemed

That Sense was breaking through -"

The pace of movement shifted, and she desperately scrabbled to recall what words came next.

"....that Sense was breaking though -

And when they all were seated,

A Service, like a Drum -

Kept beating - beating - till I thought My mind was going numb -"

Malfoy abruptly came as she tried to remember the following line. He pulled away sharply.

Hermione didn't move.

A moment later, she heard the door click once more.

Hermione tried to remember the third verse of the poem, but it floated beyond her memory's reach.

She thought—she remembered an armchair and a book of poetry. Comforting arms wrapped around a child Hermione, and a woman's hands flicking to a page. A voice she couldn't remember any longer…

Her mother— She thought it might have been her mother who taught her the poem.

She opened her eyes and stared up at the clock.

Chapter End Notes

The incomplete poem Hermione recites to herself is “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (340) by Emily Dickinson.

Chapter 7

The following three days passed in much the same manner. The table appeared promptly at seven thirty each evening. Hermione went and leaned over it a few minutes before eight o'clock. Malfoy entered—performed—and then left without a word.

Hermione recited poetry to herself and tried to take her mind as far away as she possibly could. Anything to not think about what was happening to her body.

She wasn't there. She was lying across a table because she was tired. She traced her fingers across the subtle grain of the wood. Perhaps it was oak. Or walnut.

As soon as she was permitted to leave the table, she would climb into bed and pray for sleep to come. She wasn't allow to wash until the following morning, and she didn't want to feel the fluid between her legs.

She tried not to think about it. Not while it happened. Not afterward. Not the next morning. She just—tried not to even think about it.

There was nothing she could do.

She tried to shove it away into a corner of her mind. Take her mind as far from her body as she could and stay there.

When she woke the morning after the fifth day, she wanted to weep, she was so relieved it was—at least temporarily—over. The dead sensation of horror that resided in her stomach felt faintly eased.

She got up and bathed. Scrubbing every inch of herself ritualistically. Then she stood with resolution before the bedroom door.

She was going to go out. She was going to get out of her room and explore at least...four. Four of the other rooms along the hall.

She was determined. She was going to examine every inch, and see if she could find any potential weapon by which to kill Malfoy.

She had envisioned his death in a multitude of creative ways during the last several days. Carried herself through with the fervent desire to watch the light fade from his eyes. She would give anything to drive a blade into his cold heart.

She was willing to settle for strangling or poisoning him.

Aside from Voldemort and Antonin Dolohov, there was no one else's death which Hermione now wished for so fervently. Dolohov had been the lead developer in the Voldemort's curse division. The most horrific curses that had emerged over the course of the war were attributable to him. Hermione wondered if he were alive, still inventing new methods with which to kill people with agonising slowness.

Now, Dolohov and Malfoy were nearly tied. Hermione wasn't sure which of them she wanted dead more. Probably still Dolohov, she supposed. Even if the body count were equal, at least Malfoy wasn't such a sadist. She pulled the door open and stepped out. She didn't pause to close it behind

her. She didn’t give herself time to freeze. She rushed down the hall into the nearest room.

When the door was shut, she dropped her head against the frame and forced herself to breathe. Slow deep breaths. Air all the way down into the bottom of her lungs and then slowly out to a count of eight.

Her shoulders were shaking, and her fingers twitching. She turned resolutely to examine the room. It was almost identical to hers but with two chairs and a chaise.

She turned around, taking in all the general details. As she did, she nearly cursed when she caught sight of a painting on the wall. It was a Dutch still-life. A table of flowers and fruit. Beside the table was standing the witch from the portrait in Hermione’s room. She was watching Hermione with a faintly challenging expression.

Hermione wanted to throw something at the painting, but she curled her fingers into fists and forced herself not to react. She walked slowly around the room. Peeking into the wardrobe. Under the bed. Into the bathroom.

She slipped behind the heavy winter drapes and looked out over another section of the hedge maze.

She checked every floorboard, but none of them so much as squeaked.

Of course it wouldn’t be easy.

She took a deep breath and forced herself to walk slowly into the next room.

It was almost exactly the same. The portrait followed and kept watch by sitting down to an impressionist style picnic laid out beside a river. Daintily nibbling cheese while she studied Hermione.

The third room was the most heartening. Not that it actually contained anything even remotely useful, but the bathroom contained a shower. Hermione’s heart leapt slightly. She was dying to shower.

Washing her hair in a bathtub was just one of the innumerable things she hated about her life. When she’d awoken in the Hogwarts infirmary after passing out, her hair and body had been scourgified to remove the months of grime. She couldn’t remember when she’d last washed her hair properly. She went on to the next room. She kept going. Her panic attacks seemed slightly under control when she focused on moving from room to room. Making herself count slowly to four with each inhaled and exhaled breath.

It was primarily the hallway that bothered her. The vast, open, unknown...

Individual rooms were contained. Manageable.

She made her way through all the unlocked rooms in the hallway. The closest thing to useful that she found in any of them was a fireplace poker—which she couldn’t touch.

She made her way back to her room and curled up in the chair by the window.

She felt at a loss. What was she supposed to do? She closed her eyes.

Her insides shriveled slightly. She *needed* to get close to Malfoy.

He was the closest thing to a key that she had. As long as he remained a mystery, she would have no way of predicting which ways he was and was not careful.

He appeared meticulous. Everything was unbreakable. A portrait in every room and bathroom. But no one was perfect. Everyone has some weakness, and she would find Malfoy's and use it to end him.

It would, of course, be a game of cat and mouse.

Any weaknesses she discovered, he would find quickly in her mind. If she didn't know anything about him and just tried to be unpredictable, he would still find it in her mind. The trick would be getting to know him well enough that she could move faster than he could stop her.

The thought of being anywhere near him was terrifying.

She hissed faintly through her teeth and curled into a tighter ball. Just the thought of being in sight of Malfoy made a needle-like sensation of terror slide down her spine and coil in her lower back.

She buried her face in the chair.

She would do it.

She would.

Just—not yet.

She needed a few more days to get her bearings. To separate from the last five days she'd just endured. Maybe the day after tomorrow.

Malfoy did not give her time to separate or find her bearings. He walked into her room when she was finishing lunch the next day, and she was so horrified she nearly screamed.

He just stood, staring at her for several seconds, while she clutched the back of her chair and tried to keep from cowering.

Why was he there? What did he want? Was he going to rape her again?

Her fingers twitched and spasmed as she tried to steady herself.

His cold, pale eyes slid over her as though he were taking note of every detail about her. Something flickered in them when he noticed her hands spasming. It vanished quickly into unwavering, attentive coldness.

Like a viper, the instant before it struck.

"You haven't been following instructions," he said after studying her for a minute.

Hermione stared at him, at a loss.

Was she not supposed to go into other rooms? No one had told her she couldn't. He'd *said* she was allowed to go out of her room. She realised as her stomach knotted itself—it had probably been a trick. To give him an opportunity to punish her.

She felt as though there was something lodged in her throat as she tried to swallow her terror and guess what he'd do.

“You’re supposed to go outside for an hour everyday,” he said in clarification, his lips twisted faintly. “Seeing as you barely leave your room, that set of instructions has apparently been ignored by you. I will not have your mental instability interfere with my ability to obey my Master.”

He gestured sharply toward the door and then paused and looked her over again.

“Do you have a cloak?”

Hermione shook her head faintly. He grimaced and rolled his eyes.

“I imagine letting you develop frostbite would qualify as neglect and torture,” he said with a sigh. He withdrew his wand and, with a flick, conjured a heavy, deep red cloak which he flung at her.

“Come!” He stalked from her room and down the hallway.

She followed him automatically as he led her down the main stairs of the wing and out onto a large marble veranda. Hermione gasped as she stepped outside and felt the icy breeze on her face. She bit her lip and tried to steady herself as she stood in the doorway.

He turned sharply.

“What?” he asked, his steely eyes narrowed.

“I—haven’t been outside since the day Harry died,” she said in a voice that cracked faintly. “I forgot—what wind feels like.”

He stared at her for several seconds before he snorted and turned away.

“One hour. Go,” he said, conjuring a chair and pulling a newspaper out of thin air.

Hermione’s eyes immediately locked onto the headlines she could make out. She was so starved for information it drew her attention more sharply than the abrupt sensation of being outdoors.

Repopulation Efforts Underway! Screamed the words at the top.

She felt something twist inside her, and she pressed her lips together and looked away. Malfoy noticed her glance.

“Care to see?” he asked in a slow drawl that made her skin prickle. She heard the snap of the paper unfolding and glanced over to find a picture of herself, unconscious in a hospital bed, on the cover of the The Daily Prophet.

She stared in horror.

“Potter’s Mudblood is among the first surrogates chosen by the Dark Lord to increase the magical population,” was the summary included below the headline.

Malfoy glanced at it with a smirk.

“Look, I’m included too.” His mouth twisted into a thin, malicious smile and his eyes glittered as he pointed to a picture of himself further down in the column. “In case anyone in the whole world wants to know exactly *who* is fucking you and *where* you are.”

Hermione felt like she might vomit into the potted blue spruce by the door.

“I thought it was a rather obvious trap,” Malfoy added with a sigh, looking away from her and leaning back into his chair. He pulled the paper open with a bored expression. “Then again, your Resistance was never known for its intelligence. Something more subtle would probably elude them. The Dark Lord is quite hopeful that if there’s still anyone left, they’ll feel morally obligated to come haring in to save you the way Potter always liked to.”

Oh god...

The whole world knew that Voldemort had turned her into Malfoy’s sex slave for the repopulation program. She was being used as bait. Hermione staggered back, feeling faint. She needed to get away from Malfoy and his cruelty before her mind snapped. She clapped her hand over her mouth as she stumbled down the gravel path.

“If you get lost in the hedge maze, I will send my hounds to drag you out.” Malfoy's hard voice seemed to follow her.

She ran.

She hadn’t run in ages, but she had stayed quite fit inside her cell. All the jumping and push-ups. Everything that she had done to turn her mind off.

She needed her mind off.

She couldn’t think. She needed to move until she couldn’t anymore.

She bolted down the path until it opened into a lane. She sped down it. The towering hedges around her felt suffocating.

Everything was suffocating her.

Her hands darted up, and she unclasped the cloak Malfoy had given her. She felt the wind wrench it away.

She’d rather freeze.

She ran and ran until the hedges ended and the lane carried on through large fields. She kept going. Because if she stopped, she’d think. If she thought, she’d cry. She couldn’t cry. Not until she figured out a way to get away and keep any surviving members of the Resistance from trying to save her.

Oh god.

Oh god...

Finally, she stopped.

Her lungs felt as though they were on fire. The stabbing, burning need for oxygen was sharp as her chest heaved. Her whole body was slick with sweat that rapidly became bitingly cold on her skin. There was a stabbing pain in her side. Her shoes were almost in pieces. Her skirts caked in mud. She stood panting and turned to survey where she was.

The Malfoy estate seemed endless. Grey hills of dead winter grass and dark clusters of leafless trees in the distance, all set against a grey sky.

It felt as though all the color had been leached out of the world. Except her. She stood in scarlet red.

Stark against the monochrome. She pressed her hands over her mouth as she kept gasping and panting.

When her chest finally ceased heaving, she became gradually aware of how cold she was becoming. There was a sharp wind that cut through the flimsy clothing she wore. Her hands were growing starkly white. She could feel her cheeks and the tip of her nose slowly begin to hurt. There was an icy sensation in her toes beginning to radiate up her legs as water soaked into her shoes and up her stockings.

She turned to look back in the direction she had come. The hedges were tiny in the distance.

She pressed her icy hands against her eyes for several minutes. Trying to think.

There was nothing.

Nothing new. Nothing more she could do.

Her plan remained the same. Nothing had changed.

Her situation was exactly the same as it had been the night before. The only difference was that her knowledge of it had broadened slightly. The options were still just as limited; the stakes had simply been raised further.

She slowly turned back.

She doubted Malfoy would really send hounds after her. Getting mauled by a pack of hunting dogs would potentially interfere with her reproductive abilities.

She wondered idly if the manacles would permit her to fight back against an attacking animal. If she were truly desperate to die, perhaps she could fling herself into the path of a deadly creature. Someone as vile as Malfoy might have something like a manticore stashed away on his estate. Or perhaps, if there were traps for would-be rescuers, she could fling herself into one of them.

Her teeth started chattering as she continued down the lane toward the hedges. She was too tired to run again and try to warm herself.

She hugged herself and continued on.

It hadn’t occurred to her that Voldemort would publicise the repopulation efforts. In retrospect, it was obvious. It wasn’t a secret that could be easily kept when surrogates were being distributed to seventy-two of the most preeminent wizarding families in Britain. Better to put it out entirely in the open.

She wondered idly how Malfoy felt about being publicly associated with her. The Mudblood he had hated so much back in school, now intended to be the mother of his children. All the world would know. He was so slavishly obedient to whatever his Master wanted, he probably rationalised it somehow. She sneered to herself in derision. The number of ways in which Hermione could hate him were almost mind-boggling. Every time she saw him, it was as though she found a whole new aspect of him that only added to the number of reasons why he deserved a slow, cruel death.

The sharp rocks of the gravel lane eventually cut entirely through her shoes. Her feet started to bleed as she was reaching the hedges. She pulled the useless shoes off and flung them up into the yew

where they caught. The muddy red stood out starkly.

She continued on. Shivering.

When she finally made it back to the manor and walked around the corner, she found Malfoy was still there, reading a book. His newspaper tossed aside.

She stopped. Hesitating. She didn't want to interact with him, but she was agonisingly cold. She didn't know how else to get inside.

Her movement or colour caught Malfoy's attention. He glanced up sharply and stared, looking faintly aghast as he took in her bedraggled appearance. Then he quirked an eyebrow and smirked.

"Taking your status seriously, I see. Blood red and mud." He chuckled faintly for a moment before his expression grew hard. "You shouldn't have lost your cloak. You've still got," he glanced at his watch, "ten minutes before you're allowed inside."

Hermione shrank back in misery and went back around the side of the manor. She found a spot that was somewhat out of the wind and curled up against the building in a tight ball. Trying to conserve her body heat.

She was so cold.

Her shivering had stopped, and she was growing just terribly sleepy.

Which—she vaguely realised—indicated hypothermia.

Hermione had never treated real hypothermia during the war. Only the variety brought on by dementors.

Hypothermia was not something wizarding folk tended to suffer from. Warming charms were so easy, most first years could perform them. Wizarding outerwear usually had the charms woven in.

She should go tell Malfoy that her body temperature was becoming dangerously low.

But—if she waited… maybe she'd die from it.

That would solve all her problems.

She scrunched up more closely to the side of the manor and closed her eyes. Breathing shallowly. Things slowly became comfortingly vague.

"Creative." Malfoy's harsh voice invaded the fog in her mind.

Something uncomfortably hot struck her entire body. Startled, Hermione yelped. She realised after a moment he'd cast a warming charm on her. The dramatic contrast in temperature had been physically painful when the magic of the charm collided with her skin. Malfoy was already stalking away when she looked up.

Horrid bastard. He'd warmed her just enough to counteract the hypothermia but not enough to relieve how bitterly cold she felt.

She huddled against the manor and tried to guess when ten minutes had passed. Her feet and hands were aching into the bones from the chill.

She was feeling very regretful about wherever her cloak had ended up. Apparently she did still have a little bit of Gryffindor impetuousness left. Just enough to allow herself to occasionally do very stupid things. Now that her rage and horror had eased slightly, she was able to appreciate her impulsive idiocy more.

Trying to stick it to Malfoy by refusing the care he was mandated to provide was not hurting anyone but herself. It was like refusing to eat. Weakening herself to show him she could still be obstinate was the exact opposite of what she should be doing. Malfoy wasn't going to become careless if he thought she still had fight in her.

She was cutting off her nose to spite her face.

She groaned and smacked her head against the wall of the manor.

A minute later the sound of crunching gravel caught her attention. She looked up to find Malfoy approaching once more.

His expression was cold as the wind.

He reached out and dropped her cloak at her feet.

"You found it," she said, looking down.

"Magic. The Accio spell is quite useful for those of us who can still use it," he said with a cruel smirk. "Are you going to get up, or shall I drag you? I do have more to life than merely monitoring you. There are so many Muggles still alive. There are also several house-elves I haven't kicked lately."

He smiled thinly at her.

Hermione bit her tongue. Picking up the cloak, she stood and wrapped it around herself. He turned sharply on his heel and strode back to the veranda. He stopped by the door and waited for her to catch up. When she reached him, she realised he had paled slightly and was staring at the ground behind her. She turned and saw that she had left bloody footprints across the white marble. He grew faintly contemplative as he studied them.

"Surprised to realise our blood looks the same?" she asked in a mild voice.

He sneered.

"All blood looks the same. My hounds bleed the same colour. So do my house-elves. The question of superiority is answered by power. Given that I am the master of the hounds, and the elves, and you, I do believe the answer to that question is sufficiently clear."

"Yet I'm the one intended to give you heirs," Hermione said, meeting his eye with her own cold expression.

" *That* is due to Astoria's failing, not mine," he said, his lip curling faintly. He drew his wand and banished the blood from the marble. Then he sighed and rolled his eyes.

"I suppose I can't have you ruining the rugs, regardless of how amusing it would be to leave you bleeding."

He flicked his wand at her feet and scourgified them before casting a series of careless healing charms. Then he banished the mud caking the hem of her robes.

“I trust your brain still functions enough to find your own way back to your room. If not, you can sleep on the floor somewhere.” He vanished with a crack.

Hermione stood alone before the door for several seconds. She was freezing but—

She darted over and snatched up the copy of the The Daily Prophet that had been left lying on the ground. Slipping through the door, she moved just far enough into the hallways to get away from the biting cold before she hurriedly opened it and began devouring every bit of information it contained.

Chapter 8

Repopulation Efforts Underway!

"Potter's Mudblood is among the first surrogates chosen by the Dark Lord to increase the magical population."

Hermione read on.

The first phase of the British repopulation efforts have now begun. Eligible half-blood and Mudblood surrogates have been assigned to many of Britain's most eminent wizarding families in the hope of improving the Wizarding population. The assignments have been personally approved by the Dark Lord himself in consultation with Healer Lydia Stroud, who has spent her career specialising in magical genetics and wizarding fertility.

Most notable among the surrogates is Mudblood Hermione Granger, last surviving member of the terrorist cell known as The Order of the Phoenix. The witch has had a reputation from a young age for her romantic associations with famous wizards. This was particularly notable in 1994 with not one but two Tri-Wizard competitors, Harry Potter and Viktor Krum. Now she may have found her way into the bed of her most powerful wizard yet.

Draco Malfoy, most renowned for his assassination of Warlock Albus Dumbledore at the tender age of sixteen, has long been an esteemed Death Eater. The Prophet has confirmed with several sources that surrogate Granger was delivered to Malfoy Manor just over a week ago. Since Lucius Malfoy abdicated his title of Lord to his son following the death of Narcissa Malfoy in 2001, the family line has been without a succeeding heir.

Unfortunately young Lord Malfoy cannot become too attached to the traitor warming his bed. When she has produced three Malfoy heirs, Healer Stroud confirms that surrogate Granger will be transferred on to another pureblood wizarding family in order to further aid in diversifying Britain's magical blood.

If the results from the diversification efforts are as successful as anticipated Healer Stroud hopes that such efforts will begin being rolled out across wizarding Europe within a year…"

So, Malfoy *was* the one who had killed Dumbledore. Another name on the list of those murdered by the High Reeve.

Lucius was still alive somewhere.

There was no mention of the other women in the breeding program. Hermione's eyes raced across the other columns, gathering up every scrap of information. The next column listed executions within Britain that had been performed by the High Reeve. There was a picture. Several wretched-looking men and women on their knees upon a platform. Behind them, in black robes and an ornate mask, stood the High Reeve. In the picture, he drew his wand and, with a casual flick, killed the first person. He barely spared the falling body a glance before casting a second curse on the next person. The picture's loop was only a few seconds long, but Malfoy killed three people on the platform before it began again. Hermione stared. Taking in every detail.

Knowing that it was Malfoy made it obvious that it was Malfoy. The casually elegant posture. The indolent casting. The deadly coldness that seemed to radiate from him.

However, neither the article about the repopulation efforts nor the column regarding the executions made any reference to the fact that Malfoy was the High Reeve. As though the title and its bearer were separate.

The anonymity was surprising. The newspaper didn't even offer any speculation regarding the High Reeve's identity. As though it weren't permitted to print such a thing.

Hermione mulled over that detail.

The High Reeve was Voldemort's right hand, ostensibly his representative. Hermione wondered if the anonymity was in Voldemort's interest or Malfoy's. She suspected it was likely Voldemort's. The Dark Lord had an exceptionally powerful puppet. Even Voldemort himself, when he killed Harry, had not cast the killing curse with such rapidity and lack of effort.

It wouldn't do to allow Malfoy the opportunity to gather his own followers, accumulate personal power, and then try to overthrow his Master. Forcing Malfoy to keep himself anonymous behind his title—only allowing it to be known by Death Eaters and other trusted servants—it was probably a means of controlling Malfoy.

Voldemort was keeping Malfoy quite close.

Perhaps Malfoy had secret ambitions that Voldemort worried about.

It also made Malfoy the perfect trap for Resistance fighters. If anyone tried to save Hermione, they would assume they were simply attacking a pampered, second generation Death Eater. They'd have no idea they were walking into the grasp of the High Reeve, Voldemort's most infamously deadly servant.

Hermione skimmed through the rest of the paper. Northern Europe was still not under Death Eater control. Voldemort was moving aggressively to bring the Scandinavian countries to heel. Apparently the vampires, hags, and other Dark creatures that had been brought to Britain during the war had been moved up into Northern Europe during the last several months. There was no mention of the insurrection in Romania. No mention of any known members of the Resistance still fighting.

Pius Thicknesse was still Minister of Magic. There was a Tri-Wizard Tournament planned for the upcoming year. Several pages were devoted to international Quidditch matches. Apparently the diversion of sports retained its appeal even under dystopian regime.

The rest of the paper was composed of society pages.

Astoria Malfoy was quite the socialite. She attended every event, bought tables at charities, and donated lavishly to post-war memorials. Malfoy was largely absent from the society pages, only occasionally joining his wife.

Hermione read every word, including the advertisements. Looking for any hints. Any subtext. Anything that might be unspoken but implied. If such things were included in the news, Hermione was too ignorant of current events to detect them.

Finally she refolded the newspaper carefully with her stiff fingers and returned it to the place it had

been abandoned on the veranda.

She massaged her freezing hands as she hurriedly made her way up through the manor.

She was, surprisingly, not having a panic attack by wandering back by herself. Perhaps it was only because she was so distracted by the cold. She crossed her fingers and hoped.

The route back to her rooms was simple. The moment she returned, she rushed into the bathroom and turned on the cold water. She let it run over her numb hands until feeling gradually seeped back into them and the water stopped feeling hot. Then she turned on the taps of the bathtub and drew a warm bath.

She sank into the water with a sigh, relishing the relief from the cold ache throughout her freezing body. She rubbed her feet and ankles until the last bits of grime disappeared from them.

After living in a cell for so long, she was never going to take being clean for granted again. She didn't know if she'd ever get over the newfound thrill of sinking up to her neck into a large quantity of water. It was the one and only high-point of her existence currently.

The same could not be said for the food. Which, although clearly expensive in its ingredients, was intended to be solely nutritional. She didn't know much about pre-pregnancy diets, but she didn't see why she was only allowed to eat unsauced, unsalted, and over-cooked vegetables, rye bread with unsalted butter, and boiled meat and poached eggs (also without salt.) She would kill for a bag of crisps.

As she sat in the water, slowly warming up, she considered the revelation of the day.

Her "surrogacy" under the careful watch of Malfoy was being used as bait. The taunting, luring language of the front page article was enraging. A precisely balanced tone, seeking to simultaneously dehumanise Hermione in order to prevent pity from the general public while endeavoring to stoke outrage among any sympathisers.

Hermione wondered what sorts of safety measures had been put in place to catch would-be rescuers. Were there other Death Eaters stationed in Malfoy Manor? Or was the High Reeve presumed to be capable enough to personally handle all comers?

If it were the former, Hermione would have to keep watch and try to discover them. They would be an added complexity for her escape—unless she could somehow evoke their sympathy. Or perhaps try tricking one of them into killing her if it came down to it. A highly ambitious and dubious scheme, given that Malfoy would probably find the idea in her mind long before she had any chance of enacting it.

If it were just Malfoy, well, that would be a worrying indication of Voldemort's confidence in Malfoy's abilities.

Just how dangerous was Malfoy?

Hermione rested her head on her knees and tried to remember more clearly the circumstances of Dumbledore's death over eight years before. The details felt—foggy.

She scrunched her eyes shut and struggled to recall it.

It had happened less than a month into sixth year. The wards had gone off in the halls when a Killing Curse was used. The castle had been filled with Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder and screaming, stampeding students. When the darkness finally faded, there were dozens of injured, panicked students and Dumbledore's dead body. It had been trampled in the chaos.

First year Hufflepuff and Slytherin students had just re-entered the castle from a Herbology class. They were the only ones who had seen anything. The statements were contradictory.

Dumbledore had passed by. There was an older student in the hallway. Maybe two. Male. A Ravenclaw. A Slytherin. A Gryffindor. A Hufflepuff. Cormac McLaggen. Adrian Pucey. Colin Creevey. Ernie Macmillan. Draco Malfoy. Zacharias Smith. Anthony Goldstein.

The first years didn't recognize many upperclassmen after only three weeks into the term. The general consensus was that it had been someone blond.

They heard a curse. Then darkness. A few said it happened in reverse: the darkness then the curse. Everyone was screaming and running. No one could see anything. All the wards had been shrieking.

When the darkness faded, the professors assembled everyone in the Great Hall. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement arrived to interview the students and examine the body.

The autopsy concluded the cause of death was a Killing Curse to the back. No other recent magic detected. There had been something else—something about Dumbledore's hand—

Hermione tried desperately to remember. It felt like it had been an important detail. The memory danced out of reach.

All the older students named by the first years were interviewed and cleared of suspicion. All but Draco Malfoy. He was absent. The castle and grounds were searched. He was gone.

Aurors were dispatched to Malfoy Manor and found it impenetrable. He was presumed guilty. Whether he'd personally cast the curse, had help, and why he'd done it had been unanswered questions.

The Order had assumed it had been an attempt to redeem the Malfoy Family after Lucius' failure and imprisonment following the battle in the Department of Mysteries.

Hermione couldn't remember it ever being confirmed that Malfoy had killed Dumbledore. After Death Eaters seized control of the Ministry of Magic six months later, it had been difficult to get good information. The Daily Prophet immediately became a full-fledged propaganda machine.

Had it been confirmed? She didn't remember.

Hermione's inability to recall it was meaningless. She couldn't even tell where the gaps in her memory were. Until a question was put to her, she didn't even realise what was missing.

When she tried sorting through her memories magically, it was like crawling through tar. Exhausting. Almost futile. If she poured more than the barest strand of magic into attempting it, the manacles activated and sucked everything away. The clearest sense she had of where the lost memories were located was from Voldemort, Snape, and Malfoy's various efforts to break into them.

The pain, shock, and trauma had blurred the details. It seemed as though there were few lost memories scattered throughout the war but the majority were concentrated in the last year, right up to her imprisonment.

The gaps in her knowledge tore at something inside Hermione. She was desperate to know what was missing but terrified of recovering the information. It made her feel as though she were walking through a minefield. She had no idea what the missteps might be.

Trying to accept the loss of information—of understanding—was like a sensation of bitter poison inside her.

Why had they lost the war?

Couldn't she at least remember that?

It was as though she and Malfoy were playing a game of chess, but only he could see the board. She was desperate for any scrap of knowledge.

As soon as she knew so would her enemies. Her ignorance was simultaneously a shield and a weapon. It was buying her time to escape, but it might come down upon her at any moment.

For some reason, she was almost certain it would bring her end with it.

It felt like the sword of Damocles above her head.

Her fingertips were shriveled from the water when she finally climbed out of the bath. She felt drained. She climbed into the bed and hugged a pillow to herself.

Her mind ran on and on, full of questions she had no answers to.

The next day, Malfoy appeared again immediately after lunch.

Hermione's heart sank, but she pulled on her cloak and followed him docilely. Just walking behind him made her heart pound. She wondered if he could feel it through whatever it was he had that monitored her.

When they arrived at the veranda, Malfoy immediately conjured a chair and seated himself, flicking open a newspaper. The front page story was about a new monument in honor of Voldemort. It had been unveiled in Diagon Alley. Hermione stood awkwardly beside the doorway, wondering where to go.

She glanced over at Malfoy and started to open her mouth to ask a question, but it was like her body swallowed it before she could force the words out.

Quiet .

She couldn't initiate conversation.

She stared out bitterly at the hedge maze. She supposed she would just go and wander about aimlessly. She started walking away but as she did so, a faint sense of discomfort crept over her. She looked up, and took in the open, grey sky...

Her heart seemed to abruptly stall.

It was as though all the oxygen and sound that existed were abruptly sucked away, and there was simply a void of vast endlessness before her.

There was no air.

She felt like she were suffocating. Her heart started pounding. Beating faster and faster. She could hear it.

She could see the steps. The gravel. The hedges. It felt like…

Nothing.

As though the universe ended at her toes.

If she stepped forward another inch, she'd fall into it.

She froze. She tried to move but just trembled and couldn't. She bit her lip. Trying to breathe. Trying to force herself to walk forward.

It was so—open.

She shut her eyes.

It was just in her head. It was *just* in her head.

She fought to breathe. Dragging in a series of sharp, gasping breaths as she struggled to think.

She'd been alright yesterday. She'd been so horrified and angry. She'd run several miles. But now—

She couldn't—

It was all so much.

She didn't remember the world feeling so wide before. The sky was so...high. The paths just went on and on. She didn't know where they ended.

Her hands started shaking and twitching as she thought about it. She was going to be sick.

She wanted to go back to her room.

She wanted to press herself into a corner and feel walls against her.

She stared down at her feet and felt tears pricking the corners of her eyes. Panic was rising up through her like a tide. Her heart kept going faster and faster. It felt like a fluttering bird caged inside her chest, beating itself to death as it tried to escape.

Hermione pressed her hands over her mouth and tried to keep from hyperventilating.

A sharp sound abruptly caught her attention, and she looked over to find Malfoy was gripping his newspaper so tightly his knuckles were white. His hands were shaking faintly. She gasped and stumbled away.

"Sorry—sorry—," she stammered in terror. "I'm going—"

She only made it a few feet before her legs refused to carry her further. She was afraid of being near Malfoy, but even he didn't supercede the terror that swallowed her as she tried to walk forward. Her

lungs felt like all the air had been pressed out of them. She opened her mouth and tried to gasp for breath. It wouldn't go in.

The terror was sinking into her as though a creature had slid its claws into her back. Dragging them down her spine. Tearing her open. Exposing all the muscles and nerves and bones to the cold winter air, and she was dying.

She couldn't breathe.

The world felt like it was tilting sideways.

There were needles sinking into her hands and arms.

All she could see was the open—

She couldn't stop shaking. Couldn't stop panicking. She couldn't go—

It was so open. A void. Nothing. Nothing. Forever. She was all alone in it.

Not even walls. Nothing.

She could scream forever. No sound.

No one would come.

There was darkness eating up the sky.

Then there'd be nothing.

No one would come.

She couldn't—

"Stop," was suddenly growled from behind her.

Reality crashed down on her like a flood. She started and looked back. Malfoy was pale-faced, and his eyes were flashing as he stared at her.

"You're required to be outside. You are not required to go traipsing off. Do not give yourself a mental breakdown that compromises my access to your memories."

His face twisted slightly as he kept looking at her. Drawing his wand, he conjured another chair.

"Sit. And calm down," he commanded in an icy tone.

Hermione dragged in a deep breath and let her feet carry her over. Trying not to dwell on the flood of relief that came over her. She seated herself and stared down at her hands as she worked to regain control of her breathing. She was in a chair. She was in a chair next to Malfoy. She was not in a void. There wasn't a void. There was marble under her feet. She didn't have to go anywhere. She was in a chair.

She inhaled slowly. To a count of four.

Exhale, through her mouth. To a count of six.

In and out.

Again and again.

She was in a chair. She didn't have to go anywhere.

Her heart slowly stopped pounding, but her whole chest hurt.

Once her chest's stuttering eased, she tried to force her fingers to stop twitching. They wouldn't, so she sat on them.

As her mind fully cleared from her panic, a lash of bitter despair struck her.

She was broken.

She was.

There was no point in trying to deny it.

Mentally, something inside of her had fractured during her imprisonment, and she didn't know how to fix it. She couldn't reason her way through it. It swallowed her from the inside.

She stared down at her lap. Tears slid from the corners of her eyes, down her cheeks, and along her lips before falling. The sharp cut of the wind made them feel like ice on her skin. She smeared them away and drew her cloak around herself more tightly. Pulling up the hood.

The cloak was almost smothering her with the warmth it provided, but Hermione still felt cold with horror as she sat silently on the veranda. Trying to think.

She'd been alright. Yesterday. She'd been alright. Why? Why hadn't it bothered her then?

Some kind of agoraphobia. It must be. Somehow, in the cell without light or sound or time, she'd latched onto the security of the walls. The containment had become the only constant in her life. So now, whenever she was free of the urgent horror of her current situation; whenever she had time to think…

The sense of openness created a fear that swallowed her.

Outdoors was far worse than the hallway upstairs.

Maybe she'd just been unprepared. Maybe now that she knew, she'd be able to push through the panic. If she gave herself manageable goals: Walk down the steps. Walk across the gravel. Walk to the hedge. If she paced herself.

She certainly wasn't going to be getting lost in the hedge maze anytime soon.

Her stomach twisted. Her timeline for escape kept getting longer. She hadn't even had a chance to investigate options for getting away. The longer she took— She might get pregnant.

She might already be pregnant. If she weren't, every additional month being ordered over that table increased the odds that she would be.

She wanted to cry.

She glanced over at Malfoy who was studying Quidditch scores avidly.

What useful information was she supposed to learn about him? All he did was seethe and read and

then go away and murder people.

She was never going to escape. She was probably going to die on the estate.

She studied him in despair.

He was just cold. Angry.

Icy rage seemed to hang over him. She could feel the Dark Magic twisting around his edges.

Who did he hate so much? Was he like Lucius, blaming the Order for Narcissa's death? Were all those Killing Curses revenge? Was that what fueled his rise?

Everything about him had changed. There didn't appear to be even a shred of the boy she had known so many years before.

He had grown, taller and broader. The haughtiness of his school days had faded, replaced by a palpable sense of power. Deadly assurance.

His face had lost every trace of boyishness. It was cruelly beautiful. His sharp aristocratic features set in a hard unyielding expression. His grey eyes were like knives. His hair still that pale, white blond, combed carelessly aside.

He looked, every inch of him, like an indolent English Lord. Except for the almost inhuman coldness. If an assassin's blade were made into a man, it would take the form of Draco Malfoy.

She stared at him. Taking him in.

Beautiful and damned. A fallen angel.

Or perhaps, the Angel of Death. While she was studying him, he closed the newspaper crisply and looked over at her. She met his eyes for a moment before glancing away.

"What is wrong with you?" he asked after staring at her several seconds.

She flushed faintly and didn't answer.

"If you won't tell me, I will just pull the answer from your mind," he said.

Hermione struggled not to flinch at the threat. She stared steadily at the hedge.

"I—I think it's called agoraphobia," she said after taking several deep breaths. "Something about—about open spaces makes me panic."

"Why?" "I don't know. It's not like it's rational," she said bitterly as she inspected the stitching of her cloak. The uniform needlework was something orderly to stare at. Something predictable. Something that made sense. Something unlike her irrational mind.

"You have a theory, I'm sure," he said with a challenging tone. As though he were daring her to refuse to tell him, so he could just force his way into her thoughts and drag the conclusion out for himself.

She felt tempted to lie, but it would be pointless. He would, undoubtedly, be in her mind again before she escaped. If she didn't tell him now, he'd still know by tomorrow. Or the next day. Or whenever he decided to investigate her thoughts again.

“It’s probably from being in that cell for so long,” she said after a minute. “There was nothing—It was like a void. Everyone was dead. No one was going to come for me. I was just there, and I didn’t even know how long it had been. The walls—were the only real thing. I guess—I came to rely on them. So now—when I try to walk somewhere, and I don’t—I don’t know where it goes… I don’t know. I can’t—it feels like—,” she struggled to explain the terror. “It’s like—I’m abandoned all over again. That everyone is dead, and I’m just alone —And I can handle it when my world feels small—but when I remember how big it is—I can’t. I can’t—“

She choked, and her voice trailed off. She didn’t know how to describe it. Words failed to capture all the irrational complexity. She stared away, at a loss.

Malfoy’s expression seemed to grow harder while she was talking.

“And yesterday?” he asked after a displeased pause.

“I don’t know. I suppose my horror exceeded my fear.”

He was silent for a moment before he snorted faintly and leaned back in his chair, studying her. “I have to admit, when I heard it was you I would be getting, I was looking forward to being the one to finally break you,” he said and leaned toward her slightly with a hard smile. “But I doubt that it’s even possible to exceed what you’ve done to yourself. It’s quite disappointing.”

“I’m sure you’ll still try,” she said looking him in the eye. She knew that her despair was written across her face, but there was no point in trying to hide it.

His silver eyes glinted when he saw it.

Chapter 9

Malfoy didn’t speak to her again for the remainder of the hour. He drew a book from his cloak and set to reading it, apparently impervious to the biting cold.

Hermione closed her eyes for several minutes and tried to force her heart not to pound by merely staring up into the sky.

She was going to overcome it.

She didn’t care what it took.

The days blurred together.

Malfoy appeared daily, immediately after lunch, and led her out to the veranda. Once there, he usually ignored her, reading the Prophet or some book. Hermione would skitter about on the veranda, trying to find the nerve to take a walk. She could make it down the marble steps, but she froze before reaching the gravel.

Unlike the hallway, she couldn’t seem to overcome it. It was a line she was incapable of crossing. The rational parts of her brain just stuttered to a halt.

So she sat on the steps, gathered gravel into her hands, and tossed the rocks, one at a time, as far as she could. Or arranged them into pictures or runes.

There was nothing else to do.

Malfoy never spoke to her, and because of that she couldn’t speak to him. Not that she wanted to, but the indignity that she required permission grated nonetheless.

The fact that the Malfoys needed no servants apparently meant that she was not expected to do anything except exist. They provided her with absolutely no means of occupying herself. No books, no paper, not even a bit of string. She was almost as bored in the manor as she had been in her cell in Hogwarts. Except she was also monitored obsessively by a judgemental portrait and knew there was a mansion outside her bedroom waiting to be explored if she could only summon up the nerve to do so.

Hermione had explored all the bedrooms along her hall repeatedly. She had studied the hedge maze through all the windows until she was almost certain she could find her way through it.

She was trying to find the nerve to descend the stairs and explore the other floors. She’d passed through the first floor almost nine times with Malfoy. Yet she couldn’t seem to quite bring herself to do it alone. After eight days, Malfoy did not appear after lunch. Instead, Healer Stroud walked through the door into Hermione’s room.

Hermione stood silently and watched the woman conjure an exam table in the middle of the floor.

Everyone Hermione hated seemed to force her onto tables. Voldemort. Malfoy. Stroud. Hermione walked forward before she was compelled to and seated herself on the edge.

“Open your mouth,” Healer Stroud commanded. Hermione’s mouth opened automatically, and

Healer Stroud lifted a potion and poured one drop into Hermione's mouth. As the vial was re-stoppered, Hermione caught a glance of the contents and stiffened. Veritaserum.

She supposed it was one way to make medical appointments efficient—prevent subjects from lying. Hermione couldn't understand the point. The manacles already made her obedient; Healer Stroud could just command her to tell the truth.

Healer Stroud seemed to notice the expression on Hermione's face.

"It simplifies things," Stroud said, waving her wand. "If the High Reeve had ordered you to lie about something you would be conflicted. This way, your honesty isn't your fault."

Hermione nodded. She supposed that made sense.

"Hmm. Not pregnant yet. I suppose it was rather too much to hope for so soon."

Hermione nearly collapsed with relief. Then she recalled that it meant Malfoy would come take her over a table for another five days, and her relief faded sharply.

"Look at me, Miss Granger," Healer Stroud commanded, "has anyone hurt you since you've been here?"

Hermione stared at the woman steadily while her mouth answered of its own volition.

"I have been physically raped five times and mentally raped twice."

Healer Stroud looked unfazed but somewhat thoughtful.

"The legilimency is painful?"

"Yes."

"Hmm. I'll make a note of that. No other harm to you?"

"No."

"Very good. That is a relief. There have been—problems, with some of the others."

Hermione felt horror creep over her like the caress of a ghost. "Are—are they alright?" she croaked.

"Oh, yes. We got everything taken care of. Some men simply need to be reminded that the Dark Lord's gifts can be taken back if not cared for properly," Healer Stroud said. There was no trace of sympathy or guilt in her expression as she continued waving her wand over Hermione.

Hermione wanted to reach over and snap the woman's neck. Her hands shook as she struggled to contain it.

Healer Stroud was indifferent to Hermione's poorly-concealed rage. She cast a diagnostic charm targeted at Hermione's lower abdomen.

"No tearing. That's a relief. It would have been problematic. I should have come sooner to check, but I was quite busy. Overseeing all the placements was more tedious than I imagined."

Healer Stroud appeared to expect Hermione to be sympathetic. Hermione stared pointedly at the clock and didn't answer.

“Your physical condition has declined somewhat. Are you going outside to exercise daily?” Healer Stroud asked with an irritated expression.

Hermione stiffened; her chest tightened as she tried to breathe and answer the question indifferently.

“I—wasn’t. But the High Reeve has begun ensuring it.”

“Are you walking? Long walks are important for the constitution.”

“I—can’t.”

Healer Stroud stared at Hermione. “You can’t?”

Hermione bit her lip and hesitated. “I have panic attacks—Just leaving this room is hard. The High Reeve takes me to the veranda for an hour, but I—I can’t—I can’t… I don’t—It’s so— so—“

Hermione started gasping as she tried to describe it. Even with the aid of veritaserum, she struggled to put the fear into words. She struggled to handle the wave of anger and despair she felt for having such an irrational obstacle that she couldn’t overcome on her own.

She pressed her lips together, but they twisted sharply. She could feel the pressure in her cheeks and eyes as she struggled not to cry over it.

“Interesting,” Healer Stroud said, scribbling several notes. “Presumably due to your imprisonment. It hadn’t occurred to me that going outdoors would be an issue. Hmm. Calming Draught would be insufficient, but I can’t put you on a permanent anxiety relief; they interfere with pregnancy. Perhaps something temporary, to help acclimatise you. I’ll have to research it.” Hermione said nothing.

“Materials will be provided daily for your cycle,” Stroud added as she continued writing notes. A thought seemed to occur to her, and she looked up quizzically at Hermione. “What —what was it that happened when you were in prison?”

“I just bled,” Hermione said. “The cell was kept clean, but there was nothing provided.”

Stroud shook her head faintly in disapproval. As though she had some moral superiority over Umbridge in her treatment of Hermione.

“Anything else you think I should know?” Healer Stroud asked Hermione.

“I think that you are evil and inhuman,” Hermione answered immediately.

She hadn’t even had time to realise the words coming out of her mouth; the veritaserum had just dragged them forth.

Healer Stroud’s expression flickered for a moment.

“Well, I suppose I left myself open for that. Anything about your health that you think I should know?”

Hermione thought for a moment. “No.”

“Alright then.” Healer Stroud glanced over her notes one last time. “Oh. I nearly forgot. Remove your stockings.”

Hermione obediently pulled them off. Healer Stroud glanced over Hermione's legs for a moment and then waved her wand. A sharp, burning sensation came over them for several seconds.

Hermione hissed faintly. Startled. When the burn faded she looked down and saw that her legs were bright red and irritated looking.

"A permanent hair removal charm. Several of the men have complained. One of them tried to provide a bath potion, but the spiteful little witch dunked her head under and emerged entirely bald."

Healer Stroud handed Hermione a small jar of murtlap essence.

"The irritation should fade in a day or two. I'll speak to the High Reeve about your condition."

Healer Stroud put Hermione's file back into a briefcase, and Hermione slipped off the table and stood awkwardly, holding her stockings in one hand and the jar of murtlap essence in the other. With a flick of her wand, Healer Stroud vanished the table and left the room without another word.

Malfoy arrived half an hour later, looking more angry than usual. Hermione pulled on her cloak and followed him. When they reached the veranda, he glanced over at her with a grimace.

"You are required to walk at least half a mile."

Hermione blinked up at him.

"I would send you with a house-elf, but Stroud is concerned that your self-inflicted brain injury may cause you to have a seizure if you become overwrought." He looked enraged enough to break something. "I am now required to walk you."

He stared across the estate for a moment before adding, "You are worse than a dog."

He stormed down the steps and then turned, standing on the gravel path.

"Come," he said in a cold voice. His eyes were flashing, and his lips were pressed into a hard line as he looked at her.

Hermione stared at him, incredulous. Hell would freeze over long before Draco Malfoy's presence kept her from having a panic attack.

The compulsion dragged her forward.

Hermione took a deep breath as she stepped gingerly down the steps and then, after a moment's hesitation, onto the gravel. She took four steps across it toward him and wanted to cry with rage when she didn't freeze along the way.

Apparently it was a cold day in hell.

Malfoy turned on his heel and walked down the path while she followed.

It was probably because of the manacles, she realised along the way. He had ordered her to come and so she came. The manacles forced her to be compliant while being raped. However the compulsions worked, they were apparently capable of suppressing her panic attacks in the same way they were capable of suppressing her desire to fight off Malfoy and then murder him in a painful and prolonged manner.

He strolled along the outside of the hedge maze until they passed it entirely and then led her through the paths among the wintering rose beds.

Hermione wondered if there was anything about the Malfoy estate that didn't feel cold, dead, and sterile. The gravel paths had not so much as a stone out of place. The rose bushes had been clipped meticulously for winter. The hedges cut into the sky in precise, straight walls.

Hermione had never particularly cared for formal English gardens but Malfoy Manor's might be the most horrid she'd ever seen. Hedges, and white gravel, and leafless trees and shrubs pruned within an inch of their lives.

She imagined it was less awful-looking in the spring and summer, but in its current form she had seen car parks with greater aesthetic appeal.

Malfoy did not seem inclined to appreciate the scenery either.

After storming along the paths for an hour, Malfoy led the way back to the manor. As they drew close, Hermione thought she saw an upstairs curtain twitch.

Malfoy walked to Hermione's room but rather than leave once she was there, he stayed, staring at her.

Hermione shrank away and fidgeted with the clasp on her cloak. Perhaps if she ignored him he would go away.

"Bed," he commanded after a moment.

She looked up at him, startled, and he smirked maliciously as he stepped toward her.

"Unless you'd rather do it on the floor," he said.

Hermione didn't move. She just stared at him, feeling stupefied with horror. He drew his wand and after giving a sharp, nonverbal flick, Hermione felt his magic seize hold of her and drag her backward until she collided with her bed and toppled backwards onto it.

Malfoy sauntered over, looking bored. There was a faint glint in his eyes.

Hermione bit her lip to keep from whimpering and crossed her arms across herself.

He stared down at her and then, pressing his legs between hers, leaned over her.

Hermione wished she could sink into the bed and suffocate there. Wished she could scream. Wished she could have just a shred of her magic to fight him off with.

Obedient. Quiet. Not to resist.

She tucked her chin down against her shoulder and tried to cringe away from him as much as she could.

His right hand pressed into the mattress by her head, and then she felt the tip of his wand under her chin.

"Look at me, Mudblood," he commanded. Her chin untucked itself as she turned to look up into his eyes. They were only inches away from hers. His pupils were contracted, and the grey of his irises

looked like a storm.

He drove into her mind.

She gasped with shock.

Even his legilimency was cold. Like being plunged into a freezing lake. It hurt with a sharp, clear pain.

Unlike previous occasions, her mind was unclouded with trauma or shock. The experience was far more vivid because of it. He shot through her memories, attending to all the clusters of locked ones. He tried breaking his way into one until a wail wrenched itself from her lips.

He moved quickly. As though he were simply verifying that none of them were accessible yet. After checking through them, he moved into the present.

He seemed amused by her growing hatred. By how desperately she wanted to kill him. He watched her explore the other rooms and run across the estate and sit bored on the steps of the veranda. How she had read The Daily Prophet. Her panic attack.

He examined her repeated efforts to remember the details of Dumbledore's death, and how she couldn't remember something about the warlock's arm. That detail sparked his interest. He tried to find the information, but wherever Hermione had concealed the details in her mind, he couldn't tell.

She could feel his irritation as he finally moved on to her appointment with Stroud and their walk across the estate and how deeply she disliked the gardens. When he reached her horror after he ordered her onto the bed, he finally withdrew from her mind.

He sneered down at her.

"Rest assured, Mudblood, I have no particular desire to touch you. I find your mere existence within my manor offensive."

"The feeling is decidedly mutual," Hermione said in a dry voice. It wasn't a particularly good retort; her head was throbbing. It felt as though Malfoy had inserted his entire mind into hers, and it had bruised her internally.

Malfoy straightened and looked down at her as though he expected her to say something else. She stared up at him.

"Did you really kill Dumbledore?"

He smirked and leaned against a bedpost, crossing his arms and cocking his head to the side.

"You somehow forgot that too? Is there anything useful you remember? Or do you just habitually forget everything that you haven't gotten from a textbook?" He glanced down at his nails for a moment and then buffed them against his robes in a bored manner. "I suppose that was all you ever were good for. You didn't even fight during the war, did you? I certainly never saw you. You weren't ever out there with Potter and Weasley. You just hid. Spending all your time in hospital wards. Waving your wand about futilely, saving people who ended up being better off dead."

At his words, Hermione felt the blood drain from her head so abruptly that the room swam before her eyes. She gasped as though she'd been struck by a bludger.

All the times she's healed Ron, Bill, Charlie, George and Fred, Tonks, Remus, Ginny, Hannah, Angelina, Katie…

Saved them for the end of the war. Saved them to be tortured to death. Saved them to be enslaved and raped.

She clasped her hands over her mouth and pressed her fingers tight against her lips until she felt the outline of her teeth. Her whole body shook on the bed, and she tried not to sob. A muffled whimper tore itself through her fingers. There was a pricking sensation in her eyes the moment before Malfoy's face blurred from the tears. She rolled to her side and curled into a ball.

"Since you're so curious to know. The Dark Lord personally requested that I kill Albus Dumbledore at some point during sixth year. So one Friday morning, when the bumbling idiot walked past me in the halls, I cursed him squarely in the back with a Killing Curse. He'd stopped to chat with a few first years about sherbet lemons or some other equally asinine subject. Quite careless to leave himself open like that. But that's Gryffindors for you. They never expect that someone might choose to simply assassinate them in broad daylight. I am fairly certain he even knew I was going to try to kill him, but he still put his back to me. Perhaps he presumed I lacked the nerve." He snorted faintly in disdain before sighing. "That is the one drawback of using the Killing Curse on someone's back; they miss out on that split second of realisation before they die."

Hermione bit her lip as she listened to Malfoy's drawling recitation. She had expected, if she ever asked the question, that he would be horrible and conceited about it. Somehow it still shocked her to hear it.

"I suppose your master was quite pleased with you," she said without looking at him.

"He was, especially after I presented him with the old fool's wand. He had dinner with me and my mother that night, here in this very manor. I was declared a protege."

He tone seemed vaguely hollow. Hermione glanced over her shoulder at him. He wasn't looking at her. His eyes were locked on the window, and he looked almost wistful and pensive. As though his mind had gone somewhere else.

He abruptly roused himself and smiled thinly down at her.

"Any further details you need me to provide?" He arched an eyebrow as he asked the question. His expression was mechanical.

"No," she said dropping her eyes from his face. "that was all I wanted to know." "Well." He straightened his robes and turned to leave, "The outside world beckons me. Try not to have a seizure in my absence, Mudblood."

Chapter 10

i am trying to remember you

and

let you go

at

the same time.

Nayyirah Weheed

Harry Potter was sitting on a rooftop, smoking cigarettes, staring off into the distance. Hermione clambered out of a window to join him.

"*What happened to us, Hermione?" he asked when she got close.*

"A war," she said quietly, reaching out and turning his face toward her. There was a gash on his head. His pale skin was faintly red from the blood he'd washed off. His expression was sad, tired, and angry.

"Who changed? Was it you or me?" he asked as she laced her fingers through his hair and pushed it aside so she could close the wound.

"Me," she said, avoiding his gaze.

"Why? Do you think I won't be able to do it?" he said. "Are you trying to brace yourself that I'll fail?"

She cast a diagnostic charm on him. He had two fractured ribs and bruising on his abdomen. She pushed him back so he'd lie down before she started healing him.

"I think you can do it. But—the prophecy. It's a coin toss. After Dumbledore died—," she faltered slightly.

"Death is just one curse away from us all," she said after a moment. "I can't just sit back and watch, waiting for fifty-fifty odds to land and assume I know the outcome. Not when there are so many people depending on us. What you have, the way you love people, it's pure, it's powerful. But—how many times have you killed Tom now? As a baby, because of your mother. In first and second year. But he's still here. He's still fighting you. I don't want to assume anything is enough."

"You don't think Good can just win," Harry said. The reproach in his voice was heavy.

"Everyone who wins say they were good, but they're the ones who write the history. I haven't seen anything indicating that it was actually moral superiority that made a difference," she said as she murmured the spells to repair the fractures.

"You're talking about Muggle history though. Magic is different. The magical world is different," Harry said, reaching toward her wand hand just as she moved it to heal the next rib. He closed his fingers into a fist and let it drop. Hermione shook her head minutely and Harry's expression grew

bitter. He looked up at the sky. Hermione cast a barrier charm over her hand and then began spreading a bruise paste over Harry's stomach and ribs in small circular motions.

"You used to be different," Harry said, "You used to be more righteous about things than me. What happened to S.P.E.W.? That girl would never have said Dark magic was worth the cost. What happened?"

"That girl died in a hospital ward trying to save Colin Creevey."

"I was there when Colin died too, Hermione. And I didn't change."

"I was always willing to do whatever it took, Harry. All those adventures of ours in school. Once I was in, I was in. Maybe you just never noticed how far I was willing to go for you."

When Hermione woke, she remembered the dream.

She replayed it again and again. It was a memory. Which frightened her somewhat, but there didn't seem to be anything in it that appeared particularly consequential. She tried to place the year it had happened.

Harry was smoking. A habit he started three years into the war. Hermione didn't recognise the rooftop, but that didn't mean anything. There had been dozens of safe houses that Hermione rarely visited.

Having a new memory of Harry, even one that wasn't particularly happy, felt like an unexpected gift. She missed him so bitterly it was hard to breathe sometimes.

She lay in bed and turned it over and over in her mind. Taking note of every detail. The light in his eyes. The nervous, intense way he'd take a drag from his cigarettes and exhale sharply. The exhaustion in his face. The way his hair stood on end.

She wished she'd hugged him. Or taken his hand. Or met his eyes and told him how important he was to her.

Told him how much she needed him. That he was her best friend. That she would follow him to the ends of the earth. That she would never, ever recover if she lost him.

She wished she could go back in time and find a way to fix what had gone wrong. Whatever it was. That she could go back and tell Harry not to go to Hogwarts the day of the final battle.

Go back and warn the Order of what would happen if they lost.

Their argument in the memory was a familiar one. Hermione had wanted the Order to use, well, not necessarily the Dark Arts, but magic that was ambiguously grey. As the war kept dragging on, she'd gotten pushier about it and it had strained her relationships with more people than just Harry.

She tried not to dwell on the question of whether they could have won the war if the Resistance had been willing to use Dark Magic.

The war was over and lost.

She pressed her hands against her eyes and tried to force the question away. Whatever the answer was, it would be as painful to reach as it would be futile.

Oh Harry…

Had she told him she loved him the day he died? Had she even spoken to him?

She couldn't remember.

Hermione curled up in her bed and wrapped her arms around herself in a mimicry of a hug. When she'd been in the cell, she'd wondered if it was possible to die from the devastating loneliness she felt.

She'd felt like her heart had broken.

It still felt like that. After a few minutes, she forced herself to get up. Lying in bed moping wasn't going to accomplish anything.

She paused at the window. It had snowed. The whole world outside was blanketed. The visual relief from all the dreary grey was almost heartening.

Along with the breakfast that morning, there arrived a vial of—something. Hermione did not recognise the potion. She stared at it and sniffed it but wasn't sure what it was. She set it aside. She hadn't been commanded to take it, and until she was commanded, she had no intention of imbibing any unfamiliar potions.

She made her way to the stairs and stood, staring down them. It was time. She was going to descend the stairs by herself. The fact that she hadn't already done so was pathetic. It was just a staircase. Just a staircase leading to a hall she'd already walked through dozens of times with Malfoy.

Her shoulders shook with an almost imperceptible tremor, and she squared them.

She felt like a frightened child.

She hated it.

She pressed her lips together and took a deep breath. Then she pressed her hand against the wall and slowly took a step.

She was going to escape, she told herself.

Before she got pregnant, she was going to escape from Malfoy Manor. Someday she was going to come back and murder Malfoy.

She was going to be free. Free. Somewhere with sunshine and magic and people who wouldn't hurt her.

She focused on the thought until there were no more steps left to descend.

She glanced around. Her hand was still pressed against the wall. She could feel the faint texture of the wallpaper. Touching the walls seemed to help her keep her heart-rate somewhat reasonable.

She went into a tea room, coatroom, and a drawing room. Exploring them all thoroughly. The portrait stalked Hermione the entire time.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Even the cords for the drapes were spelled to be irremovable. She opened sideboards, and cupboards, and linen closets and there wasn't a single thing inside of them

that was useful. Not as a weapon she could use. Not for escape.

She shoved a drawer shut with a frustrated snap. If she was going to find anything with potential, she was going to have to explore the occupied wings of the manor. It was easy for Malfoy to ensure that an empty wing had nothing Hermione could utilise. It would be harder to maintain such care in other parts of the house.

Astoria had struck Hermione as a bit flighty. Given how devoted she was to ignoring Hermione's existence, she probably would not trouble herself with employing the same overabundance of caution that Malfoy did.

Hermione returned slowly to her room and stared across the pristine landscape below her. She felt drained from her "excursion" downstairs. As though she'd run a marathon.

Everything took so much effort.

She rested her cheek against the glass and felt freshly awash in despair.

Even if she managed to conquer her agoraphobia, that was barely even a start. No matter what lies she whispered to herself. The truth was that she remained entirely at a loss about how to accomplish anything more.

She glanced down at the manacles around her wrists.

She'd been considering and experimenting with their abilities for the last several days. Ever since Malfoy had been able to override her agoraphobia. She had started to analyse more carefully how the compulsions worked.

She had been baffled over how they could be so powerful. She'd studied various dark artifacts during the war. The manacles were unlike anything she'd encountered.

She started her experiments by trying to disobey the compulsion of quietness by attempting to scream. The concept was less restrictive than obedience. She was allowed to make noise and speak when spoken to. It seemed like the easiest one to try to overcome. She'd thought that if she fought hard enough she could force her way through by sheer willpower, in the same manner that strong-minded individuals could eventually throw off the Imperio.

She was fairly sure she qualified as at least a somewhat strong-minded individual.

When she tried to open her mouth to scream, she just—stopped. It didn't matter how hard she fought to force sound out. She struggled until the manacles began growing hot.

She couldn't beat them.

Eventually she had collapsed onto the floor, drained to the point that she struggled to remain conscious.

As she lay there, watching the room swim before her eyes, she began to realise the reason the manacles were so powerful. They were using *her* magic. Wizarding folks had no more ability to stem the magic inside them than they could turn off their adrenal glands. Whatever effort she poured into overpowering the manacles, the manacles had in equal measure to repress her. She couldn't even scream or rage with frustration when she realised it. She had so much fury inside herself she

felt as though she might burst into flames.

She wanted to break something. She wanted to use magic and make something explode. She wanted to do something that would hurt.

She wanted to punch a mirror the way people did in movies. To see the glass shatter and fracture until it looked the way she felt. She wanted her knuckles to split and bleed and feel the pain in her metacarpal bones, through her palms and into her wrists… She was desperate to feel something other than the emotional agony she felt she was drowning in.

But she couldn't.

She tried circumventing the manacles in various ways.

The compulsion went beyond merely not screaming or speaking unless spoken to. She couldn't be loud because she was commanded to be quiet. She couldn't bang a door or stomp. Any method that occurred to make noise; when she tried to do it, she was stopped.

That was when it began to dawn on her that she was also the one controlling the compulsions. She was commanded to be quiet. It was her awareness of being unquiet that activated the manacles. Anything that she considered loud, resisting, disobedient, she couldn't do.

That was why Healer Stroud had been so concerned with ensuring the mental stability of all the girls. If they lost their minds, the compulsions couldn't control them. That was why the screaming girl had been able to attack someone.

The manacles were as limitless in their restrictions as Hermione's creativity.

Hermione tried to focus on something else as she tried to stomp her feet or slam a door. Performing mental arithmancy. Mentally reciting the recipe for a Draught of Peace. The manacles still activated.

She had run out of new ideas about how to try circumventing them.

She turned away from the snowy landscape and began exercising in her room. It had felt awkward with the attention of the portrait but after nearly a month, she no longer cared.

She was so tired of thinking and despairing afresh.

Not that she could stop herself from thinking even as she slotted her feet under the wardrobe and began doing sit-ups until her abdominal muscles felt like they had been injected with acid. At least it was a way of directing her rage.

She wouldn't be able to kill Malfoy. The manacles made it impossible.

She couldn't escape on her own either.

Umbridge hadn't even bothered with laying a compulsion against escaping. That was how certain she and Healer Stroud were that the girls couldn't get the manacles off. That detail was the only loophole Hermione currently had to exploit. She could do things with the intention of escaping.

She had reviewed everything she knew about the manacles carefully. Hannah had made no mention of anyone ever getting them off despite whatever laxness or camaraderie had been developed with the gossiping guards. The manacles had a trace in them but rather than just get someone to take them

off, Angelina had attempted to steal the trace.

Quite a number of people had managed to escape Hogwarts. All the people Malfoy had killed. No one had ever successfully escaped entirely because none of them could get the manacles off.

What had Hannah said? Unless Hermione could cut her hands off, she'd never escape.

How did the manacles come off?

Two Death Eaters had come to Hogwarts the day the new ones had been put on. Yaxley and Rowle. They had been called up when the guards started stunning all the women, and they'd been gone when she'd been rennervated.

Only Death Eaters bearing a Dark Mark could remove the manacles.

She had two options. She had to find a way to make Malfoy either kill her or help her to escape. There were no options that excluded him. It didn't matter if the Manor had an entire set of camping gear, a basket of portkeys, and a weapon she could somehow touch, it would all be useless to her if she couldn't get the manacles off.

She snarled quietly to herself in frustration and rolled over and started doing push-ups until she couldn't lift herself off the ground any more.

She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling.

Draco Malfoy, where is the chink in your perfect armour?

As if on cue the door opened and Malfoy walked in. She turned her head to look at him, still too tired to try dragging herself off the floor.

He stared down at her, something flickering in his eyes after a moment.

"A Muggle thing, I'll assume," he said.

Hermione rolled her eyes and forced herself to stand up. She felt as though her whole body were made of jelly.

He glanced around the room. His eyes landed on the vial of potion Hermione had refused to take earlier. He summoned it across the room wandlessly and caught it deftly in his right hand.

"I realise that, being a Gryffindor, there are certain obvious things that you will always somehow fail to comprehend. I suppose I shouldn't really be surprised that you somehow missed the implicit instruction that you should swallow this," he said, his mouth quirking in faint bemusement.

Hermione crossed her arms stubbornly. While it might be strategically advisable to seem docile and obedient, as a former Potions Mistress, Hermione was far too paranoid to agree to such a thing.

"What is it?" she asked.

Malfoy's expression grew gloating.

"I'll tell if you swallow every drop like a good girl," he said, flashing a malicious smirk. Hermione did not budge. Malfoy smiled faintly as he stared at her.

"Come here, Mudblood," he commanded after a moment.

Hermione glared at him as her unwilling feet carried her across the room to him. They didn't stop until she was mere inches from him, so close her robes brushed against his.

She stared balefully down at his shoes.

"Look at me, Mudblood."

Her chin raised itself until she was staring into his eyes. He was still smiling.

"Surely you are aware that I'm not going to kill you," he said. His eyes were dancing with cruel amusement. "After all, if I were, I imagine you'd feel obliged to come running."

Hermione glowered. Yes, she knew, but poison was only one of the innumerable things he could dose her with. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and it made her ears roar.

"Open your mouth," he commanded, unstoppering the vial and then proceeding to upend it into her opened mouth. "Swallow all of it."

Hermione's mouth closed, and she swallowed. The potion tasted bitter, with a faint tingling effect on her tongue and throat as it slid down to her stomach. She felt it pause there for a moment before it dispersed itself into her system.

It felt like an egg was cracked across the back of her mind. Something cold oozed over her consciousness until her mind felt entirely enveloped inside it. As though someone had plucked out her brain and placed it inside a tank of ice water. Her body was there, but her mind was—not. It was like experiencing herself in third person.

Her heart rate dropped to a steady beat.

She should be panicking. It was as though her consciousness had been severed from her endocrine system. There was no surge of adrenalin or norepinephrine. No fear.

It was merely an observation: she *should* be panicking. She was not. She looked up at Malfoy.

She was aware that she hated him. This was a piece of information that seemed of utmost importance, and yet she couldn't feel it. Hatred was a construct rather than an emotion.

He was staring at her intently.

"How do you feel, Mudblood?" he asked after a moment. His sharp eyes were taking in every detail, studying her face, and eyes, and posture as she stood before him. Her hands had stopped spasming; she realised when he glanced down at them. It was as though he were cataloguing her. Hermione felt her skin prickle with awareness, and a faint shiver ran down her spine, but she couldn't feel a corresponding wash of fear. Just awareness.

"Cold," she answered. "My brain feels cold. What did you do to me?"

"It's intended to acclimatise you to the estate," he said, stepping back as he continued to carefully appraise her. "So that I am no longer obliged to monitor you in person." Hermione said nothing. Her brain was analysing.

The unfamiliarity of the manor upset her. The unknown. It made her panic. The potion blocked that. She could go wherever she wanted now.

The potion blocked everything she realised. She wasn’t sad. Or angry. Or ashamed. Her grief was gone. Her rage.

She was—nothing.

She simply existed in cold nothingness.

She looked up at Malfoy. “Is this what it feels like to be you?”

Chapter 11

Malfoy laughed faintly.

“Like it?” he asked.

She tilted her head to the side. He was easy to look at now that she didn’t feel frightened or overwhelmed by her hatred of him. She did have a conscious awareness that he was dangerous, but her body didn’t have any physical reaction. No twisting in her stomach. No tripled heart-rate. He could have been a statue.

“It feels like I’m dead,” she said.

He nodded as though the statement didn’t surprise him.

“The effects are temporary. It will fade after twelve hours. And eventually you’ll become immune. It should work long enough for you to acclimatise to the manor and estate.”

Hermione stared up at him.

“You’re being different to me now. You’re less mean. Why are you even doing this for me?” she said. She furrowed her brow in confusion. Apparently she was still able to feel confused.

He quirked an eyebrow and leaned forward so close his breath ghosted across her cheek.

“I’m not doing this for you, Mudblood,” he said softly into her ear. “I’m doing it for me. You wouldn’t react anyway.”

He straightened.

“See? Nothing. No elevated pulse. No pounding heart. I could bring in a boggart or bend you over a table and you wouldn’t blink. Not much fun.”

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. If she were wanting to commit suicide it would be easier to do so while under the effect of the potion. Malfoy might not be able to detect anything until too late.

Malfoy became stone-faced. He gestured toward the door. “Shall we?”

She went to get her cloak and followed him outside. He paused on the veranda and watched as she descended the steps by herself. The snow had been cleared from the gravel path but she could feel the cold already biting her toes through her shoes. It was bitterly cold that day.

She hesitated for a moment, trying to decide where to go. Then she walked over to the hedge maze. On all her walks with Malfoy he had never gone into it. She was quite curious about whether she could find her way through.

It was huge. The hedges towered over her. It made her recall the hedge maze from the Triwizard tournament. She doubted Malfoy’s hedge would try to eat her or contained any dark creatures. She wandered through the looping, twisting, winding path and thought about the potion Malfoy had forced down her throat.

She’d had the passing thought that he was dosing himself with it in order to be such a cold and evil

bastard, but she dismissed it after a moment's thought. The killing curse was emotion based magic. Impossible to cast with detachment.

Although, Malfoy seemed terrifyingly capable of somehow bending the rules around that curse.

Putting aside Malfoy and the mystery of his bottomless well of hatred, she could use the potion. She could make far more progress in pursuit of escape under the influence of the potion than she had been able to in the last month. So much so that it seemed suspiciously careless of Malfoy.

She paused to consider.

Malfoy was not careless. No matter how much he hated monitoring her. He wouldn't be careless. There must be some kind of failsafe that made him confident enough to dose her with something so powerful. He wouldn't possibly risk it otherwise, even if he found monitoring her to be a form of torture.

How could he be certain she wouldn't do anything when her heart-rate and pulse were unlikely to tip him off?

She'd quite nearly flung herself off a balcony and he'd only just stopped her. Known exactly when he needed to appear…

She looked down at her wrists.

He had to have sensed it through the manacles. But how had he known to come then but never bothered to appear during her panic attacks. A monitor charm, even a specialised one, couldn't possibly differentiate that precisely.

Unless…

Malfoy was somehow reading her mind through them—

As soon as the thought dawned on her she felt certain she was right. How, she wasn't sure. But she was willing to bet on it.

How irritating. She should be enraged but couldn't summon it. She should be swallowed by despair. But intellectual aggravation was as much as she could muster.

As though his legilimency wasn't invasive enough; trawling through her mind as though it were his own personal oyster bed. She was certain he was also somehow reading her mind through the manacles.

He never skimmed her thoughts. She had noticed. She remembered how Snape used to do that with students. Dip in through the eyes and glean what was forefront. When she made eye contact with Malfoy he never bothered to.

Hermione turned around. She stalked out of the hedge maze and made her way back to the veranda where Malfoy seemed immersed in a book on alchemy.

He snapped the book shut and looked up at her while she stood staring at him. Hands on her hips.

She couldn't say anything but she could glare.

He seemed to realise that she couldn't say anything and just smirked faintly and looked back at her.

“Yes?” he finally said after nearly a minute.

“Are you reading my mind?” she said.

He smiled broadly.

“And it only took a month for you to realise it,” he said in mock praise. “Although granted, you have been rather busy crying and moping and being afraid of hallways and the sky.”

The nice thing about having no emotions was that Malfoy’s nastiness merely felt like pebbles being dropped into a pond. A small, quick splash into her mental imperviousness and then stillness and indifference again.

“How is that possible?” she asked raising a skeptical eyebrow. It defied several fundamental laws of magic.

“Rest assured, Mudblood, I am not reading all of your thoughts. If I had to subject myself to the constant stream of your consciousness I would probably Avada myself. You only register when you’re doing something—interesting. And it spares me from having to show up just because you’re trying to descend a staircase by yourself.”

Non-drugged Hermione would have flushed angrily at his mockery. But Present Hermione just blinked and considered the information.

So it wasn’t a constant thing. That was good to know. But when something registered enough he was somehow able to delve in and read her foremost thoughts. That—was a problem.

She studied him. She would have to steal whatever it was that he was monitoring her with. Umbridge had described it as a charm carried by the head of the household. Hermione wasn’t sure what it could be. Magical charms were normally something metal to channel the magical connection. And they needed to be worn; necklaces or bracelets or rings were the most common. Malfoy didn’t seem to wear any jewelry, not even a wedding band. The only visible piece on him was the black ring on his right hand.

Maybe that was it.

“You can’t steal it,” Malfoy drawled.

She looked at him sharply.

“It’s not a thing. It’s not this,” he said, and raised his hand to show her the band she’d been eying. He slid it off his finger and tossed it to her. She caught it reflexively and studied it.

It was some type of black metal. It didn’t seem to have any kind of strong magical signature the way something connected to the manacles would. But maybe it still was. He might be lying. Maybe he was trying to misdirect her.

She wondered what he’d do if she swallowed it.

He burst out laughing.

“Don’t swallow it.”

She looked up sharply and he quirked an eyebrow knowingly. He smirked and held out his hand.

She reluctantly dropped it into his palm and he slid it back onto his finger.

“As I said, it’s not a thing. You can’t steal the trace. Not the one on you. They used blood magic to make your manacles.”

Hermione stared at him in astonishment.

“I’m in your head?” she said, her mouth dropping open slightly as the realization struck her.

They had taken her blood.

When she was at Hogwarts, they had taken vials of her blood, and her hair. She had assumed it was for genetic testing. It hadn’t occurred to her that it would be used to perform a blood magic ritual.

That meant that she was, by her lifeblood, tied into Malfoy’s consciousness. He could sense her in the back of his mind. It was like blood wards on estates and castles, creating a subconscious connection to the Lord in possession of it. Blood wards allowed the owner to detect when someone entered or tried to tamper with anything. Hermione existed in Malfoy’s mind in a similar manner.

If she weren’t entirely emotionless she would have been cold with horror.

He nodded.

“You’re Potter’s Mudblood. Additional security measures were considered necessary. So, let us establish now how things work: I will always know what you’re doing and I will always be able to find you. Unless you can get those manacles off.” He eyed them and gave a faint smile. “I would dearly love to see you manage such a thing.”

He laughed.

“Perhaps you can start by seducing me,” he advised drolly, leaning back in his chair and looking her up and down. “Steal my heart with your wit and charms.”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Right. Maybe tomorrow,” she said, her mind already churning. “Well, this has all been very illuminating,” she said. “I won’t disturb your reading further.”

Then she turned on her heel and strode back into the hedge maze.

She wound and twisted through the hedge-maze as she thought. Her options had narrowed further. Malfoy clearly did not expect her to escape. He did not even appear concerned about it. She didn’t blame him. She didn’t expect to be able to escape either.

It had already been a fool’s hope. Now it felt like total idiocy. She sighed faintly and watched her breath puff away as a cloud in the cold air.

When the potion wore off she was going to be severely depressed.

She explored the entire hedge maze. Her feet were numb with cold and soaked by the time she exited again. She limped back to the veranda. Malfoy said nothing and she walked past him back into the manor and up to her room by herself.

Emotionless as she was, it was nice to feel more like a functioning person again. No grief. No fear.

No depression or despair. She didn't have to worry her body would betray her with a panic attack.

The potion could easily get addictive.

Not that Malfoy would allow it. Healer Stroud had mentioned that potions for anxiety could interfere with pregnancy, so she was probably only going to be dosed with it for a short time.

Hermione wished she knew more about magical pregnancy. It had been a largely overlooked aspect of her training as a healer. Given parchment and a quill she could write a thirty inch essay on anxiety potions and how they interacted with healing magic and dark curses. But pregnancy was excluded from casualty healing. Almost no one had babies during the war and if they did, they stopped fighting and went to a midwife.

She wondered how the potion was made. She was almost positive it contained billywig sting slime, valerian and sopophorous bean. Maybe sloth brain mucus too. She thought back over the flavor and tingling as she had swallowed it. Perhaps that was a reaction of the sting slime combined with syrup of Hellebore.

It was nice to have something new to think about. Her brain had felt like it had scratched itself raw ever since the war. Completely starved of anything new to turn over in her mind. It was full of the past. Reviewing it over again and again. Wondering what had gone wrong.

Her past was like a millstone. Always dragging her down. Dragging her inexorably back as she wondered again and again what had gone wrong.

Had she known? Had she known why the Order had lost the war? Known and hidden that information? Chosen to torture herself by concealing it?

Why? As Malfoy had said, she had lost the war. What would she bother protecting even in the aftermath? Knowing that everyone she cared about was already imprisoned or dead?

Like Dumbledore's death the details surrounding the end of the war felt foggy. She couldn't remember why they had gone to Hogwarts. She couldn't even remember getting captured. She remembered Harry dying. And then she was in a cage watching the Weasleys being tortured.

She'd assumed she'd blanked due to shock.

Hermione explored the entire wing of the manor from top to bottom before nightfall. The attics, every closet, and servant's stairs and tunnels. She didn't comb through the rooms, but she hoped if she grew familiar with them that she'd be able to come back without panicking or having a nervous breakdown even without the potion.

She wondered how many house elves the Malfoys had. There wasn't so much as a cobweb in the darkest corners of the attic.

The next morning she woke and felt like a boulder had been placed on her chest. Pinned to her bed and overwhelmed by the whiplash of despair she'd been unable to experience the day before. She fought to breathe.

The twelve hour respite made all her emotional pain hurt more. Cast it into stark relief. She hadn't realised how deep the cuts of grief and loneliness reached inside of her until she was briefly freed from the pain of them. As the weight of it bore down on her once more she felt as though she were

being ground to dust. She could almost feel the edges of herself crumbling and breaking. Dissolving into ether. There was almost nothing left of her but hurting.

Her spine and the back of her neck felt overheated. While the rest of her body was clammy and icy cold. Her skin was damp. As though she'd sweated the potion out in the night.

She rolled from the bed and was violently sick upon the floor before she could bolt for the bathroom.

She slumped down, shivering. Her body felt leaden. She could barely move her arms. She wanted a shower. She was too hot and too cold.

She was thirsty. She was desperate for water.

She wanted a hug. A fresh wave of loneliness struck her so abruptly she burst into tears.

Feeling sick and weak made her feel like a child again. Desperate for her mum to fuss over her and lay a hand against her forehead. For comfort.

She couldn't even remember her mum but she missed her nonetheless. She recalled being in bed and having cool fingers on her face, brushing away a lock of hair and then resting on her cheek.

When the wave of nausea finally passed she dragged herself into the bathroom and after drinking several glasses of water, dropped herself into a lukewarm bath.

It was like having a hangover while sick with the flu. Perhaps it was what withdrawal felt like. Hermione had never experienced a drug addiction as far as she could recall.

Of course Malfoy wouldn't warn her that she'd feel like death once the potion wore off. She cursed him strongly in her mind and hoped he'd feel it.

She wanted to drown herself.

When she went back into her room the floor had been cleaned.

She felt feverish still. She dragged the blankets off her bed and huddled under them, pressing her cheek to the window.

She was sick the whole day and apparently Malfoy had anticipated it because he didn't show up expecting her to go outside. The following afternoon he arrived without a word despite the daggers she'd glared at him and led her out to the veranda. She discovered that the potion had acclimatised her somewhat. She was able to manage walking off the veranda without having a total panic attack. She shook and had to fight against hyperventilating but her fear didn't swallow her. Getting across the gravel and into the hedge was the hardest. But once she was among the towering yew, brushing her fingers against the walls, and focusing on navigating the route, she was able to get herself to breathe somewhat evenly.

When she returned to the veranda Malfoy was gone. Apparently satisfied that he was no longer obliged to monitor or walk her.

The potion appeared again the next morning. Hermione spent several hours debating with herself over whether to take it again. The mere thought of spending another day going through withdrawal made her nauseated. In the end she gritted her teeth and downed it.

She crept through the manor like a shadow and explored the main wing. She was constantly on alert for the sharp tap of Astoria's shoes. She hadn't encountered the witch since the night she'd taken Hermione to Malfoy's room. But Hermione had occasionally caught glimpses of someone watching from the windows when Malfoy had taken her outside. She wasn't interested in testing whether Astoria's early threats had been sincere.

She explored most of the main wing that day. There were so many doors that were locked she realised that Malfoy had probably keyed the manor with her blood. Caged her within her own blood signature.

The next day her withdrawal was worse.

Then three days later the potion did not appear with breakfast. Hermione suspected she knew why and could barely eat. She paced madly in her room and then went and sat under the spray of the shower down the hall for an hour while she tried to stop shaking.

After dinner a house elf appeared to take the dishes away.

"You is to get ready for tonight," it said before vanishing.

Hermione sat frozen in her chair. She'd assumed as much. Confirmation still felt worse. Having had an additional month to dread it made the horror feel colder. It felt as though something were twisting her organs into a tighter and tighter knot until she felt like something was about to tear. Her chest felt so tight she could barely manage to draw even shallow breaths.

She went into the bathroom and bathed. When she re-emerged she found herself glancing repeatedly toward the center of the room. She was terrified that Malfoy might choose to vary the experience. She found herself clinging to the hope that the table would appear and he wouldn't do anything novel.

She didn't want to be raped in a new way.

She nearly sobbed with relief when the table appeared at precisely 7:30.

She wanted to slap herself. In what world of horror was a woman happy that she was going to be raped in a familiar manner?

Malfoy came and went for five evenings without a word to her. In precisely the same manner as he had during the previous month.

Every evening Hermione gripped the table and imagined herself brewing the anxiety potion. She had so much free time to mull over things she had started trying to guess how to reverse engineer it.

She tried to make it as real to herself as possible. Trying to recreate the scents and sensations. She was exacting about the details. Obsessive.

Far far away from the rocking. From the bite of the wood into her hip bones. From the sliding sensation inside of her that she refused to allow her mind to attend to.

She was not there. She was brewing a potion.

She removed a pewter cauldron from the shelf using a step-stool. With a practiced flick of her wand she conjured a flame. She waited until the metal reached a medium temperature before adding the

billywig sting slime. She would hold the vial in her right hand, and tip it. The sharp scent would tickle her nose.

The pewter and heat would cause the levitating properties of the sting slime to evaporate after boiling for one minute. She would bottle the steam and use it as an anesthetic on localised injuries. She would remove a sloth brain from a jar and using a long knife slice it so thinly the pieces were transparent. The brain under her hand would be spongy and delicate. Her touch would be very light and the knife blade razor sharp. After one minute she would reduce the temperature of the slime to a low simmer and place the slices of sloth brain across the surface, allowing two minutes for the sting slime and sloth brain to amalgamate, slowly turning into a steel blue colour with a viscous consistency.

In the meanwhile she would prepare the sopophorous bean. She would use twenty. Crushing them under her silver dagger's blade before extracting the juice. Feeling the pressure in the knuckle of her thumb as she bore down. She imagined the sensation of the bean giving way under her blade. Once the juice was added she would stir the potion clockwise twelve times with a silver brewing rod and then eight times counterclockwise with an ash rod. Then the potion would be covered and left to brew on a low temperature for seventy-three hours. The slow brewing was necessary to nullify the somnolent properties of the sopophorous juice. The potion would turn pale green. In the seventy-fourth hour she would add minced murtlap tentacles, a crushed squill, valerian, and powdered ashwinder eggshells. She would bring it to a rapid boil for thirty seconds and then use a cooling charm to reduce the temperature to just above freezing. The potion would become midnight blue with an aqueous consistency. Then she would drip syrup of hellebore over the surface. One drop for ten slow clockwise and then counterclockwise stir rotations. Her arm would tire slightly. Thirty drops in all until the potion thickened and stuck to the ash stir rod. Stir it three times with a silver rod and bring it to simmer for five minutes before removing it from the heat and allowing it to drop to room temperature without magic. It would become dark grey and syrupy. It would yield twenty-five doses.

She brewed it in her mind every night. Adjusting quantities and techniques. Revising the order of added ingredients. By the fifth night she was almost positive that she had figured the entire recipe out.

On the sixth day she forced herself to go outside alone for fear that otherwise Malfoy would show up and order her to.

Conquering her agoraphobia, she had decided was her first priority. Any schemes involving Malfoy would wait until she could manage going outdoors consistently.

Deep down she suspected she was merely deluding herself and avoiding him. But she was at a loss as to how to trick him into killing her when she couldn't even talk to him without his permission. As for seducing him, per his suggestion, well, the idea was so absurd it was almost laughable.

The next day he showed up in her room, pinned her to the bed and tore through her memories. He barely spoke to her. When he was done he simply turned on his heel and walked out. Hermione had a dream two days later of Alastor Moody standing in front of her in a small storage closet. His eye spinning around suspiciously. It was as though they had been underwater, the words exchanged were indecipherable. He had looked at her intensely as he said something, watching her reaction. She remembered feeling skeptical but determined. Moody said something else and Hermione shook

her head. He nodded sharply and when he turned to leave he had been stone-faced. But his eye as he looked back had hesitation in it. Alastor never hesitated. After Alastor had gone she stood alone for several minutes.

She didn't know what the dream meant. She tried not to dwell on it.

Hermione explored the main wing of the manor. The portraits were apparently strictly forbidden from speaking to her. They watched her with a gimlet eye but never uttered a word. She explored the hedge maze until she could walk through it with her eyes closed. She couldn't quite manage anywhere else outdoors unless she crept along the side of the manor.

Open spaces were still very difficult. She couldn't even peel herself off the wall when walking down the larger hallways. And she could barely stand to set foot inside the ballroom in the main wing of the house.

After ten days Healer Stroud arrived again to see if Hermione was pregnant. Hermione was not. Hermione had been exercising aggressively in her room to funnel her rage. Healer Stroud was pleased to see the improvement in Hermione's physical condition.

The next day when Hermione entered her room shivering from her walk she found Malfoy there, waiting for her in full Death Eater regalia.

"Fancy an outing, Mudblood?"

Hermione stared at him, taking in what he was wearing. His face was an expressionless mask as he approached her.

"Did you forget?" he asked, his silver eyes flickering. "Two months. No pregnancy. The Dark Lord is eager to see you."

He gripped her by the arm before she could back away and apparated.

Chapter 12

The hall that Voldemort resided in was damp and warm like a reptile cage. Somewhere underground. The walls that she could see in the darkness were stone with no windows.

Far underground.

The air was thick and sour. Stale. Putrid with dark magic.

Hermione broke out in a cold sweat and Malfoy dragged her forward as she fought to escape. It wasn't a conscious choice. Every cell in her body screamed for her to get away.

Malfoy's hand on her was like a vice. She couldn't wrench herself free. He barely seemed to notice that she was writhing in his grip.

"My Lord," he said with a respectful tone as he bowed. "I have brought the Mudblood. As you requested."

His words were punctuated by Hermione's panicked stuttering breaths as she tried to quell her panic. A crushing weight suddenly bore down on her back and forced her prostrate upon the moist stone floor. She could barely breathe under the pressure and fought to drag oxygen down her throat as her jaw was ground into the hard floor. The sound rattled in her ears.

"Oh, yes," Voldemort murmured in a caressing whisper. "Stroud mentioned she was not yet gestating."

Hermione rolled her panicked eyes upward so she could see from where she was pinned on the ground. Voldemort was reclining in a large stone throne staring down at her indolently.

He waved a hand, it had dull scales on it.

"Bring her forward," Voldemort ordered.

The weight crushing Hermione into the ground was released and two attendants pulled her up off the floor and dragged her up the steps of the dais, forcing her to her knees at Voldemort's feet.

Voldemort didn't sit up. He turned his head slightly and wiped the corner of his mouth. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut but he drove into her mind. His mind inside hers felt like a branding iron. He was burning her. Damaging her. She was screaming and screaming until her lungs and throat gave out and she just shook in agony.

Hermione had not realised how much her shock from being removed the cell had dulled everything. She hadn't remember it hurting so much. Or perhaps Voldemort was feeling vindictive due to her lack of pregnancy. It was like having her consciousness flayed.

She didn't know how long it lasted. Forever. She felt like she should have died several times along the way.

Voldemort tried breaking through the magic around her locked memories and when he finally gave up he proceeded to ravage all her recent memories. Her arrival at Malfoy Manor, the first time Malfoy raped her in his room. And the second time, and the third and the fourth and the fifth and the

sixth. He made her relive all ten of them as though he were curious to see how Malfoy did it. Her panic attacks. Her conversations with Malfoy. Her limited interactions with Astoria. Her questions and suspicions and schemes. He pored over the months with excessive cruelty and curiosity.

He razed her mind until she hung limp. Her muscles too worn to even shake.

Finally he withdrew and the hands gripping Hermione allowed her to drop to the ground, spasming.

“You knew the Mudblood in school,” Hermione heard Voldemort say after a minute.

“Indeed, My Lord,” Malfoy said with a faint tone of derision. “One of Potter’s favourites.”

“She dreams of your death quite desperately. More than she dreams even of mine,” Voldemort said with amusement.

“A sign that she has a sense of what is even possible,” Malfoy drawled.

Voldemort nudged Hermione with his toe. Her vision kept wobbling and then vanishing intermittently when she tried to focus. It wasn’t darkness. It was as though her eyes didn’t know how to see anymore.

“She is clever. I trust you are keeping her well in hand, High Reeve.”

“Of course, My Lord. You know I succeed in whatever you set me to.”

“Indeed,” Voldemort said. “It has been a long time since you have caused me any disappointment.”

“I am vowed to you, My Lord.”

“You are aware that she is dangerous,” Voldemort said and Hermione felt magic suddenly drag her up off the floor and she hung suspended as he stared at her, his face twisted with distaste. “She is lying in wait to find a weakness to exploit.”

“You have had her carefully caged. You know I will not fail you,” Malfoy said respectfully.

“I want her pregnant,” Voldemort said with a forceful hiss. Then, as though it were an afterthought, he added, “It concerns me that the Malfoy line is without an heir.” “Of course, My Lord, Astoria and I have been careful to follow all of Healer Stroud’s instructions,” said Malfoy.

“Very well,” Voldemort said, sinking further into his throne and dabbing the corner of his mouth again. “Return her to the manor then.”

Malfoy bowed and then gripped Hermione by her arm from where she hung suspended. The magic holding her released and she fell against him. He grimaced in obvious distaste and proceed to drag her out of the hall and away from the cloying, oppressive nest of dark magic.

When they were halfway down some hallway Malfoy shoved her against a wall and released her. She slid halfway down it and raised her shaking hands up to wipe away the tears crusting on her cheeks. She could still barely see through the blinding pain in her mind.

“Drink this,” he commanded, slipping a vial of a common pain relief potion into her hand. “Otherwise you’ll black out when I apparate you and it will add considerably to your recovery time.” She swallowed it, fairly certain he wasn’t going to poison her. “Did that ever happen to you?” she found herself asking, when the pain began easing so she could speak again and his face slowly

swam into focus.

Malfoy eyed her for a moment. “More than once,” he said. “My training was rigorous.” She nodded.

“Was that after fifth year?” she asked looking up at him. The pain seemed to fade somewhat when she focused on the question. “Yes,” he said it in a clipped tone. “Your aunt?” “Hmm,” he hummed in confirmation, his eyes narrowed. They were both staring at each other intently. He felt like the only thing she could see.

“Not the only thing you learned that summer,” she noted. His eyes widened incrementally.

“Are you needing a confession for something? Should I tell you everything I’ve done?” he asked in a careful drawl. He drew closer so that he towered above her.

She forced herself not to shrink or cower down further than she was already slumped. She stared up into his eyes. A question rose to her lips and she felt somehow that it was vital that she ask it. “Do you want to?” she said. He stared at her as though he were considering something. Then his eyes grew flinty and he stepped back.

“Why would I want to talk to you about anything, Mudblood?” he said coldly, grasping her by the arm and dragging her down the hallway to the apparition point.

Hermione’s brain still felt crushed and damaged. When Malfoy apparated back into her room the squeezing sensation on her head made her cry out and collapse, vomiting as soon as she reappeared.

He stood stiffly, staring down at her and banished the mess from the floor while she tried to fight off the endless waves of nausea.

“Go to bed. You have two days to recover before I’ll expect you to be walking again,” he said before turning to leave. She would have glared at him if she could have interrupted her body’s compulsive dry heaving.

When her body finally became convinced that there was absolutely nothing in her stomach left to expel Hermione crawled into bed and cradled her head in her arms.

She wasn’t sure when two days passed. She slept like a dead thing and couldn’t have said whether it had been hours or days when she finally woke without a migraine.

While she was poking at breakfast Malfoy strode in.

She glared at him sullenly from the bed.

“Season's greetings, Mudblood,” he drawled.

She stared at him in mild surprise.

“As a Christmas gift to myself, I have decided to end the weekly ritual of replacing all your shoes. It should arrive tomorrow. Please do not interpret it as a sign of my affection,” he said and chuckled for a moment. Then his face grew cold as he walked closer. “It’s been three days and you haven’t left your room. I hope you’re not going to inconvenience me.”

Hermione felt too ill to feel afraid of Malfoy. “I have no way of knowing what the date is,” she said in a flat voice. “Perhaps giving me a calendar could be an additional present for yourself.”

He stared at her.

“It didn’t occur to you to just ask an elf?” he asked after a moment.

Hermione stared at him and felt unwanted tears of humiliation prick at the corner of her eyes. Her mouth twisted as she fought not to snarl or cry. “I can’t speak unless spoken to,” she said stiffly.

Malfoy froze and was silent for a surprisingly long time. An indecipherable expression rippled across his face before he blinked and laughed faintly.

“And here I thought it was an elf rights thing,” he said with a smirk. His eyes still looked slightly frozen. “I’ll send an elf later and see if you can speak if it initiates.”

He spun on his heel and walked out without another word.

When Hermione finished picking at her food an elf appeared to take the dishes away.

“Master is wanting to know if you is needing anything,” it said, avoiding her gaze.

“A calendar that indicates the date, if that is possible. And—a book, about anything.”

The house elf looked uncomfortable.

“I can be getting you a calendar. But Mistress was sayin the Mudblood isn’t to sully any Malfoy books and had them hexed so theys would be burning your dirty blood.”

Hermione looked away as her chest tightened. She bit her lip so it wouldn’t tremble. Of course Malfoy or Astoria would do something spiteful like specifically restrict her from reading.

“Nevermind then,” she said quietly.

“You could be having the Daily Prophet, if you is wanting it,” the elf offered.

“That—would be nice,” said Hermione unwilling to let herself feel hopeful about it.

“Is the Mudblood wanting anything else?”

Hermione’s mouth twitched. She almost asked the elf to call her Hermione. She hadn’t had anyone call her Hermione since—since—

It was hard to remember.

But she wasn’t sure she wanted to know whether the elf had specific instructions about only calling her Mudblood. It probably did. It was easier not to let herself even ask.

“Nothing else,” she said looking out the window.

The elf popped away.

A calendar had appeared on the wall and a copy of the Daily Prophet was on her bed that afternoon when she returned, shivering, from her walk.

December 25th. Seeing it on the wall left her frozen for several minutes. The copy of the newspaper corroborated the date. She felt afraid to reach out and touch it, half expecting for it to burn her. An extra twist of spite.

Hesitantly she rested a fingertip on it. Nothing happened.

She sat down and read it front to back. Savouring words.

Reading.

She had missed it. The last time when she had read The Daily Prophet it had been so rushed.

She read it slowly through once. And then again. And again. Every word.

It was mostly trash. Thinly veiled propaganda. The political news was nearly unintelligible amid all the spin. Hermione had never found quidditch interesting but she avidly read through the game recaps since they seemed to be the only thing accurately reported on. The society pages went on and on about Astoria. Her name was dropped in every single society piece.

Hermione read the paper forward and backward. She looked for any patterns. Or codes. Just in case.

The next morning she found a pair of boots in the wardrobe among her shoes. Malfoy's "present." She had been wearing through the soles of her flimsy slippers every few days and walking in the snow had her toes nearly frostbitten on several occasions.

The boots were dragon-hide. When she put them on they resized themselves to her perfectly. She could tell they had enchantments woven into them to keep her feet at a perfect temperature. She could walk a hundred miles in them and never get a blister.

She stared at them in confusion. They were—excessive.

Much like the cloak he'd provided.

Perhaps Malfoy didn't even know how to buy normal shoes. He just assumed that all boots were supposed to come in dragon-hide with temperature control and cushioning charms.

Finding Malfoy at all considerate was disconcerting. She stared at the boots for several more minutes.

She dismissed the notion. If Astoria owned a lapdog it would assuredly be fitted with a jeweled collar.

She was just a well-shod and cloaked pet surrogate for him to fuck.

He was probably worried that if she got frostbite he'd have to interact with her again.

And, given that she was allegedly intended to bear three children before she departed the estate she was presumably expected to live at Malfoy Manor for at least four years. Possibly five or six. Considering how spartan Malfoy Manor seemed to be Malfoy apparently adhered to a strict "buy it once, buy it for life," philosophy. The fact he'd had to buy her twenty pairs of shoes in two months probably was something he found morally offensive.

If the boots had been given to her earlier she might have felt hopeful about using them to escape. But as she looked down at her feet she didn't feel even the faintest flicker of optimism. Although it would be nice not to have her feet ache for hours each day.

The things she found herself being grateful for were truly horrifying.

The house elf appeared again to take away her dishes and asked if she wanted anything.

“Am I allowed to keep the newspapers after I’ve read them?” Hermione asked cautiously.

The question was apparently not one the elf had been prepared to answer. It shuffled its feet and seemed to be considering.

“Topsy thinks so. It will just be being banished after,” the elf said after several minutes. “Why is the Mudblood wanting them?”

Hermione shrugged.

“There’s nothing to do. Having paper I could use would be nice. I’m guessing that I’ll be refused if I ask for a ball of string or yarn.”

The elf nodded that Hermione’s guess was accurate.

“Topsy is to keep this room clean. But the Mudblood can be using the paper until the next paper is coming,” the elf said.

“Fair enough,” Hermione said in agreement. Not that she had any choice in the matter.

Hermione read the day’s newspaper twelve times before tearing it into neat squares. She had spent the previous night going through a list of things she thought she might be permitted to have. She had assumed that she couldn’t have knitting needles. Being restricted from yarn had been a guess, although where Malfoy worried she’d hang herself without a portrait catching her seemed questionable—

Maybe outside. She’d have to look more carefully at the trees on the estate… She brushed aside such schemes to save for a later date.

She wasn’t thinking about suicide. She wasn’t thinking about the way her head still throbbed; as though Voldemort had done permanent damage to her mind. She wasn’t thinking about how sounds hurt. Or how her hands had started spasming because of the clock again. Or that the way Voldemort had forced her to re-live being raped had felt even more traumatic than the times when it happened. She wasn’t thinking about how she was never going to escape. She wasn’t thinking about anything but carefully ripping up The Daily Prophet as steadily as her spasming fingers would allow her to.

That was all.

It was the only thing she was thinking about.

When she had made several perfect squares she set to folding them. She started with origami cranes.

She couldn’t remember exactly where she had learned to make them. The ability felt like muscle memory, creating the precise creases in a specific order that she didn’t recall memorizing.

Her father? Maybe?

Someone with agile, precise fingers. At a kitchen table guiding her through the steps. *“If you fold a thousand cranes in one year, you’ll get a wish,” a male voice said.*

“No, you get good luck and happiness,” came a woman’s voice from the next room.

“Same thing.”

“Not really. A wish assumes a person knows what’s best for them. Good luck and happiness leaves it to Fate to lead you to the right place. I’d much prefer to be gifted with good luck and happiness than a single wish.”

“Ok, Confucius. I’ll defer to your superior understanding of the mystic.”

“Now you’re purposely trying to provoke me. Conflating Confucianism and Japanese Mythology is an offense before the gods of pedagogy. I will not let you fill our daughter’s head with such misinformation.”

“Maybe I’m doing it to encourage her critical thinking…. Fine, I sincerely apologise for how horribly miseducated she’ll be now. I will accept full responsibility when it causes her to be cast from civil society and forced to wander the earth as a nomad. In the future I’ll be sure to cross-reference everything I say at the library first.”

“ Yes, thank you. That would be great.”

“The trouble with marrying someone who never bores you is that they don’t even leave a man in peace to teach his daughter his favourite hobby. Here, I’ll show you how to make origami tessellations. You mother doesn’t know a thing about those. I just read a paper by an astrophysicist who proposes using the technique to store large membranes on satellites.”

Hermione folded origami cranes until her fingertips felt raw. Then she arranged them on the floor so they would stand, wings extended. The newspaper was not an ideal strength for origami but it was something to do. Hermione hadn’t had anything to do in so long.

It was too bad that Japanese mythology wasn’t actually real magic. She’d fold a hundred thousand cranes if it would give her a bit of luck.

She gathered the cranes up and flattened them all. Leaving them in a neat pile for the elves to banish.

She wondered what her parents had been like. What kinds of jobs they had.

She hoped that her inability to remember them meant that they were safe somewhere. That she had protected them before the war started.

She hoped they didn’t know what had become of her.

Chapter 13

Five days later Hermione was seated on the floor by the window folding what was, by her count, her two hundred and thirty-sixth paper crane when the door opened and a young man peered through. His eyes swept across the room and when they landed on Hermione he entered the room and quickly closed the door behind himself.

His expression was shifty and he stared at her intently as he came forward.

He seemed hurried.

He was solidly built with dark hair and an angular face. He was wearing formal, dark blue dress robes. He had thick stubble across his face.

Hermione's instinctive response at the sight of him was utter terror.

She froze as though petrified and stared.

There was nowhere to run. She couldn't even scream.

It hadn't ever occurred to her that a stranger might just walk into her room one day.

He paused slightly as he approached, noting her expression.

"You don't remember me," he said in a tone of surprise. There seemed to be a hint of offense in the words.

Hermione studied him desperately, trying to guess who he was. He seemed vaguely familiar. Perhaps from school? Someone she hadn't known well.

He kept coming across the room. He was halfway across it and Hermione's hands started spasming as she struggled to think of what to do. If she bolted, she'd have to get out of earshot or he could just order her to stop. Perhaps if she plugged her ears...but he could just stun her.

She couldn't—

He was only a few feet away and his expression was growing triumphant.

Suddenly there was a sharp crack and Malfoy appeared beside her out of thin air. Hermione started and shrank toward him, away from the approaching stranger.

The intense, triumphant expression on the young man's face faded sharply into indifference at the sight of Malfoy. The shiftiness of his posture falling away as he straightened and glanced around Hermione's room. "Lose your way, Montague?" Malfoy asked coldly as he stepped slightly in front of Hermione.

Montague shrugged.

"Just exploring," he said. "I got curious when I saw her. You've got a lot of protective wards on this room, Malfoy."

Hermione's eyes darted to the walls. Were there? She'd never noticed. It was difficult to detect

certain types of wards without a wand or a bit of magic to press into them.

“The Dark Lord entrusted her to me with specific instructions regarding her care. It’s always useful to know when someone is trespassing,” Malfoy replied. His tone was pure ice.

Montague laughed. “Is she not allowed visitors?”

“She is not,” Malfoy said, stepping away from Hermione after giving her the most perfunctory glance. “And if you were just curious you could have asked me. It’s nearly midnight. Perhaps we should return to the party. I’m sure Astoria will be wanting us.”

Malfoy stalked across the room and waited for Montague to follow him. Montague seemed to intentionally take his time.

He glanced around the room again and then back at Hermione. The intensity returned to his eyes as he stared down at her with Malfoy behind him.

Something. There was something he was trying to communicate to her.

Then he turned and followed Malfoy out.

Hermione stared at the door that closed behind them for several minutes.

Montague.

Graham Montague?

He’d been on the Inquisitorial Squad. And he’d been captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team. Fred and George had shoved him into the Vanishing Cabinet during Fifth Year.

Hermione barely knew him. He barely knew her.

When had she known him to the extent that he would expect her to recognize him?

While she was thinking, Hermione laid aside the piece of paper her spasming fingers had wrecked.

The Malfoys were hosting a New Year’s Party in the manor. She would have had no idea if Montague and Malfoy hadn’t appeared. She stood and went to the door, hesitating. She wanted to see people with her own eyes but the thought also terrified her.

If anyone saw her they could do anything they wanted to her unless Malfoy showed up and stopped them. Her sharp, instinctive relief at his arrival earlier unsettled her in more ways than she wanted to think about.

Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t.

She stood at the door for several minutes before hesitantly opening it. She crept down the hall and slipped into one of the disused servants passages, winding her way toward the main wing of the house.

Gradually the sound of a string quartet began to reach her ears accompanied by the buzz of conversations. She stopped and listened.

Music. She hadn’t heard music in years.

She paused and leaned against the wall to absorb it. Shutting her eyes and breathing to the tempo of the strings.

She had forgotten how it felt to hear music.

After fifteen minutes she remembered herself and continued on her way. She cracked open a door and peeked into a darkened hallway to see if it was clear. She was about to step out when she heard a rustle of fabric and a woman's giggle. Hermione stepped sharply back and watched Astoria dart around the corner grasping someone's wrist. A male wrist most distinctly not belonging to Malfoy.

Hermione couldn't see clearly in the darkness but the build of the man was wrong. Broader and shorter. And not pale enough or blond.

Astoria leaned back against the wall and the man closed in on her until Hermione couldn't see the blonde witch at all. Hermione's eyes widened as the giggling gave way to breathy gasps.

She hadn't—well, it wasn't necessarily surprising—Hermione just hadn't expect to encounter it.

Suddenly two, milk white legs became visible as they were wrapped around the man's hips and the noises took a turn from gasping to moaning.

Hermione found herself weirdly fascinated until a horrifying thought occurred to her—

Malfoy would find it in her memory.

She stepped sharply back and fled silently up the stairs. She took another route toward the ballroom. She had gotten quite good at navigating most of the manor. As long as she didn't rush herself and used the walls as a touchstone she could go almost anywhere.

On the third floor there was a cramped, twisty little stairway that led to a balcony alcove over the ballroom. Hermione assumed the party was located in the ballroom.

She'd hoped to go somewhere where she could listen to conversation but Astoria's hallway affair had interfered. Hermione replayed what she had witnessed. The act itself wasn't surprising but the indiscretion seemed excessive. Cheating on her husband in a hallway filled with his family's portraits. Even if it were an open-marriage the overtness seemed impolitic.

Hermione slipped into the alcove, knelt down and peeked over the railing, down at the party. The ballroom was filled with people all decked out in their most lavish robes. The room was resplendent in its decorations. Glittering. The chandeliers were lit with fairy lights and in the center of the room a tower of champagne belle coupes had been constructed and stood at least six feet tall; champagne was flowing down it in an endless magical fountain.

It was a party meant for the society pages. There were several photographers snapping pictures for the next morning's paper.

Hermione saw Pius Thicknesse and several other important figures in the Ministry. There were dozens of Death Eaters Hermione recognized.

A flash of pale blond caught Hermione's eye and she found Malfoy engaged in a conversation with Dolores Umbridge. The Warden was dressed in pink and fuschia dress robes with a plunging neckline and a pendant suggestively nestled in her bosom.

Umbridge was simpering and touching Malfoy on the arm while he remained stone-faced. His eyes kept surreptitiously flicking down to her chest in a way that appeared to be a mixture of curiosity and malaise.

Before Hermione could take further note of the interaction, a scarlet figure caught her attention. She glanced over and then did a double take. There was a surrogate at the party.

Hermione's eyes raced across the room and she realised there were nine of them there.

She stared in astonishment. She couldn't recognize any of them; they were all bonneted and following wizards around as though they were shadows. Their heads were tucked downward and their shoulders curled forward submissively.

Some of the wizards they accompanied were Death Eaters. Hermione recognised Amycus Carrow, Mulciber, and Avery. The other wizards were younger. She thought one might be Adrian Pucey and another Marcus Flint.

The surrogates, Hermione realised as she watched, were being used as status symbols. Paraded about to show off a bloodline's importance.

Hermione's chest grew tight and her face twisted as she watched. The women didn't go near each other. Presumably they had been ordered not to wander. But as two of them happened to pass each other Hermione saw their hands brush for an instant. To pass a message or merely for comfort Hermione couldn't tell from the distance overhead.

Hermione had assumed that the other surrogates were kept cloistered away in houses the way she was. Clearly it was a mistaken assumption.

It was Hermione who was the exceptional case. Order member. Hidden memories. Blood-bound manacles. Given to the High Reeve. Taken to Voldemort.

It was possible the other girls were even permitted to go out alone. In fact, given that they were traceable, there wasn't necessarily any reason that they couldn't.

Perhaps Hermione was even technically allowed to do such a thing. Although somehow she doubted it. If she wasn't allowed visitors it seemed dubious that Malfoy would let her leave the estate.

"One minute till midnight!" a witch with a sonorused voice called out gaily, interrupting Hermione's thoughts. "Get ready for your New Year's kisses!

Astoria swept back into the room. Her robes were straightened and her expression innocent but there was a faint sense of dishevelment about her person that seemed obvious to Hermione. Her lipstick was faintly smeared so that it didn't rest entirely within the lines of her lips. Not an overt smudge, but enough that the shape of her mouth was carelessly softened. Her expression was smug.

Hermione watched Astoria make her way over to Malfoy. Astoria's expression schooled itself into that of affection as she drew closer but there was a spark of something else in her eyes.

Malfoy looked her over carefully but his expression didn't so much as flicker. Hermione couldn't see Astoria's face well from her angle. "Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven!" The room started chanting a countdown to the new year.

As the numbers wound down Malfoy reached forward, his expression still blank, and ran his thumb across Astoria's mouth.

At zero he leaned forward and pressed his lips against Astoria's. A camera flashed. The room exploded with magical fireworks and cheers and clanking glassware as people toasted.

Malfoy's lips remained pressed against Astoria's but as he kissed his wife he raised his eyes, looking over Astoria's head. His cool, grey eyes immediately locked onto Hermione's face.

Hermione forgot to breathe.

She stared back. Frozen.

Her stomach flipped sharply. Her heart started pounding until she could hear it in her ears. She shivered. She felt she should draw back out of sight but found herself trapped, as though she were locked in place by the cold silver. He continued to stare up at her until Astoria broke off the kiss and turned away. Then his eyes dropped and a false, aristocratic smile curved across his lips as he glanced around the room, clapping without enthusiasm for several seconds before snatching up a flute of champagne from a floating tray.

He knocked it back as though it were mouthwash.

Hermione sat back and pressed her hands against her chest and willed her heart to stop pounding.

The party lasted for hours. Hermione watched the social interactions carefully. Looking for signs of tension and alliances. Trying to identify the social order that existed in order to understand what was left out by The Daily Prophet.

She spotted Graham Montague mingling and watched him for some time, trying to discern if there was anything familiar about him. He seemed entirely foreign to her.

Malfoy did not mingle. He stood and let other people mingle with him. It grew steadily apparent to Hermione which people knew him to be the High Reeve and which were unaware. There was a sort of reverence and delicacy in how young Death Eaters approached him. Older Death Eaters like Mulciber and Nott Sr and Yaxley treated him with a mixture of deference and resentment.

While others there might not have known why Malfoy was treated so carefully by the Death Eaters, the respect was contagious. The room oriented itself around Malfoy in a way that was unnerving.

Malfoy played his part like a benevolent king. The coldness and the sense of danger to his person was undeniable but he layered it beneath aristocratic courtesy. The hard unyielding expression he wore around her was absent. He looked indulgent. He smirked and engaged in what appeared to be endless streams of small talk with anyone who approached. But to Hermione, unable to make out his words and simply watching him, he always seemed cold and bored.

It was nearly four in the morning before the last guests departed.

Hermione made her way cautiously back to her room. She didn't want to run into Astoria again, or any stragglers. When she reached the hallway leading to her room, she peeked around the corner and found Malfoy standing there. He glanced over and caught sight of her immediately.

"Have fun?" he asked.

She hesitated for several seconds before she walked around the corner and came toward him, shrugging.

“It was more interesting than just reading about it,” she said.

He snorted. “Words I would never have expected to hear from you,” he said. Then he stared at her, his eyes narrowed.

“Why is Montague interested in you?” he inquired, arching an eyebrow.

Hermione glanced up at him. Of course that was why he was there.

She was surprised he was asking. He had, she’d realised, a schedule for examining her memories. Approximately every ten days. He’d skipped the last session and left it to Voldemort, but she was expecting him to show up at some point the next day. If he wanted to he could have just waited.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I barely knew him in school.”

Curiosity bloomed in Malfoy’s eyes.

“Really? How intriguing,” he said in a musing tone. “You are so full of surprises.”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Do you say that to every girl?” she said in a sarcastically sweet tone.

He looked at her sharply and then chuckled.

“Go to bed, Mudblood.”

Despite the phrasing it didn’t feel like a command. Hermione stared at him for a moment longer before she walked into her room anyway.

He was still standing in the hallway when she shut the door.

The next morning’s paper had a picture of Malfoy and Astoria on the cover. It captured the moment Malfoy reached forward and ran his thumb across Astoria’s lips before leaning down to kiss her, fireworks and streamers exploded behind them.

It looked sweet and romantic and intimate.

On the next page was a picture of the High Reeve killing several people in France. One girl looked vaguely familiar. Hermione thought she might have visited Hogwarts during the Triwizard Tournament.

Hermione hadn’t realised Malfoy had left the country earlier in the week.

Hermione folded the picture of Malfoy and Astoria into a herringbone tessellation and amused herself by making Malfoy and Astoria bounce apart and then squash into each other.

She tore the picture of the High Reeve into tiny strips and wove it into a coaster. In another life, she thought, perhaps she might enjoy creating complex lattice-work pie crusts.

Then she stood up and started her exercise routine. She was getting ridiculously fit, which was a satisfying although mostly pointless feeling. It didn’t really matter how much of a punch she could

pack if she wasn't able to actually drive her fist into Malfoy's face. There wasn't much point in stamina when she nearly had a panic attack every time she pulled her hand away from the yew hedges or tried to move at a speed that wasn't glacial.

Malfoy appeared late in the afternoon to go through her memories. He didn't seem to find anything of particular interest in her recent past. He didn't even react when he encountered her memory of Astoria shagging someone in the hallway. The portraits had probably already informed him. When he finished sorting through her memories he straightened.

Hermione blinked away the headache and sat up, looking at him.

"I'll be sending a final vial of the potion up tomorrow," he said.

Hermione nodded. He didn't say anything else before he turned to go.

That night Hermione laid out a careful plan for the next day in her mind. If it was indeed her last dose of the potion then there were a number of things she wanted to try to attempt before the effects wore off.

The next morning she did not pause to read the newspaper. She knocked back the potion before she could hesitate or dread the withdrawal she'd suffer later. Then she headed out the door with cool determination.

Her first destination was the South Wing of the manor. The only part of the house still unexplored. She started on the uppermost floors and worked her way down. They were the ones in which she was least likely to encounter anyone so she could move more quickly.

As she reached the first floor she felt the air take on a cold, twistedness that she could detect even through the cushioning effects of the potion. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end and her body broke out in a cold sweat.

Dark magic.

It was so thick in the air she could almost taste it.

She froze on the stairway for several minutes calculating.

Hermione's instincts were strongly urging her to turn around and leave. But they were smothered under the potion.

Her curiosity wasn't.

She descended the last several steps and moved in the direction of the feeling. There was a door ajar. She peeked in. It was a large drawing room. Entirely bare. Not a stick of furniture. No drapes. No portraits on the walls. Even the wallpaper appeared to have been peeled off.

There was nothing but a large cage sitting in the center of the room. The dark magic hung over the room, but seemed most concentrated around the cage. Hermione walked slowly into the room and approached it.

People had died in that room. A lot of people. Slowly.

Hermione's mind automatically began cataloguing the dark rituals she knew of that created such a

lasting presence of twisted magic.

It had probably corrupted some of the ley lines of the estate.

As she drew nearer she found that the cage was built into the stones of the floor. Quite literally irremovable unless the foundation stones of the manor were torn out, and even that might not be enough.

Just standing near the cage caused her to taste a tang in her mouth like the copper flavour of blood.

She looked it over carefully.

It was an inch shorter than her. Probably exactly five feet tall and about three feet wide. Tall enough for a prisoner to stoop or huddle in.

She wondered how many people had been kept inside it.

A noise startled her. She turned and found Malfoy at the door staring at her with irritation that bordered on rage.

“Of course you would lack the sense not to come in here,” he said in a hard voice as he stalked toward her.

Chapter 14

Hermione turned to face Malfoy calmly. Even without the potion she doubted she would feel particularly concerned. She stared at him as he approached. She had concluded that generally speaking he was neither permitted nor inclined to hurt her.

Even if he weren't desperate to get into her memories, Stroud had probably spelled out for him exactly why it would be inadvisable to break her psychologically.

"Do you keep a lot of people in cages?" she asked.

He stared at her. His face was slightly pale, and his eyes were dark and hardened with the rage that he was just barely keeping in check. She could feel it twisting around at the edges of him.

It occurred to her that if she were to try to get him to kill her it was probably the perfect moment. He was surrounded by the corrupting, addictive dark magic of the room. She could feel it seeping into her as she stood staring at him. A person could get high casting in an environment like that.

Malfoy's lips pressed into a hard line and she could see his jaw clench. There was so much under his endless cold. A slumbering rage was stirring, rippling just beneath the surface.

The drawing room had a strong effect on him. A sly provocation and she might make him snap. She wondered how to go about it.

Then he sneered.

"You're the only one I keep caged, Mudblood," he said. His expression abruptly became indifferent again, the rage seemingly dragged back down. "Haven't you noticed?"

Hermione's lip curled. Malfoy glanced around the room; his face seemed drawn but he smirked down at her.

"This is my father's wing of the manor," he said.

Hermione looked around sharply, half-expecting Lucius Malfoy to pop out from somewhere wearing a maniacal expression reminiscent of his former sister-in-law.

"Luckily for you," Malfoy continued, "he's been abroad since the end of the war. I like to hope that he wouldn't torture and curse you horribly if you happened to cross paths, but if I were a betting man I'd have to admit the odds are not in your favour. So I advise against regular visits here. Do you want a complete tour before we go? Just to assure yourself that there's nothing conveniently lying about for you to murder me with?" He gestured toward the door of the drawing room and Hermione walked out. He followed her closely and then shut the door firmly. Hermione felt a pulse of magic as it clicked shut; the sense of darkness vanished from the air around them. The door was heavily wrapped in wards. Hermione realised it was probably one of the innumerable rooms she was not meant to enter. She wondered if the other rooms he kept her from were similarly dredged in twisted magic.

"Astoria didn't say there was anywhere I shouldn't go. I assumed I was allowed to explore the whole manor," she said. "I'm sure she would be thrilled if you met an unfortunate end.The indignity

of your mere existence aside, it might spell my demise as well. Then she'd become a wealthy widow and free to conduct all her tawdry affairs even more publicly than she already does," Malfoy said in an indifferent tone.

Hermione looked up at him.

"And you don't care?"

He glanced over at Hermione with a cold expression.

"I was commanded to marry her therefore I married her. I was never commanded to care," he said.

"You sound as enslaved as I am," Hermione said tauntingly.

Malfoy stopped short in the hallway and slowly turned to face her, quirking an eyebrow. He surveyed her for several seconds and Hermione stopped and stared back at him.

"Are you trying to provoke me or sway my allegiance, Mudblood? How terribly audacious of you."

Hermione studied his face for several moments before quirking an eyebrow of her own. "You've already thought it. If you hadn't, you'd be offended right now," she said.

He continued to study her face for several moments before a slow smile curled across his lips. "You know, you almost seem like a Gryffindor again."

"I've always been a Gryffindor," she replied.

His eyes flashed faintly.

"True. I suppose you have," he said.

The moment stretched out. They kept staring at each other. Hermione's eyes narrowed as she appraised him.

It seemed impossible that he was only twenty-four years old. No one so young should have had such icily restrained rage behind their eyes. Hermione had seen many faces aged by the war but Malfoy's expression was unique. He was so precisely contained, but his eyes were a storm; they looked like they contained the power of the sea.

How many people had he killed? People he knew, people he didn't know; none of it seemed to faze him. His face was somehow unmarked by worry; young and indolent. She could see the war in his eyes, though. All the deaths he had caused and seen, as though the grey in them were ghosts.

Ginny. He'd killed Ginny. Strung her corpse up in front of all her friends and left it to rot.

And Minerva. Poppy Pomfrey, who'd first taught Hermione healing. Neville, Hermione's first friend in the wizarding world. Moody.

Malfoy had killed everyone left after the war. He'd wiped out the Order of the Phoenix.

Even under the potion, the hatred and rage she felt toward him for it was inescapable. She did not merely hate him emotionally. The fury over all he had destroyed was a structure in her mind. He deserved to suffer deeply for everything he'd done. She did not need to feel emotions to believe it.

She couldn't understand what he got from doing any of it. He was wealthy but he didn't seem to do

anything with it. He was powerful but he was obliged to keep it anonymous. He had no apparent hobbies other than efficiently killing people and reading. He didn't even seem to particularly enjoy killing people.

His life seemed bizarrely empty of anything satisfying. What drove him?

She opened her mouth to prod but caught herself and refrained. She had to tread cautiously. She wanted to think more about it.

He smirked when he saw her mouth close.

"Composing a psychological sketch of me?" he asked.

Hermione quirked her mouth into a faint smile.

"Yes," she said.

"I'll look forward to seeing it," he said turning to continue down the hallway.

She sniffed and glared after him.

There was a sharp click of heels and Astoria suddenly came around the corner. When she caught sight of Hermione and Malfoy her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed themselves.

"Are we all socializing together now?" Astoria asked in a saccharine voice.

"Just touring the manor," Malfoy drawled, Astoria's face whitened slightly. "The door to the drawing room in the south wing was opened." "Perhaps the house-elves left it open," Astoria said stiffly.

"Indeed," he said with a smirk. "It was undoubtedly the house-elves."

"I thought you had business today," Astoria said, changing the subject abruptly. "You said your day was quite full when I asked you to stop by the fundraiser this afternoon and yet here you are 'touring the manor.'"

Hermione wavered slightly as she stood between Malfoy and Astoria. There was something intensely unstable about Malfoy's wife and Hermione was disinclined to draw her attention— or ire. However, there was no way for Hermione to withdraw from the tense conversation without being obvious.

She remained frozen, watching the scene carefully while trying to be unobtrusive. The words felt laced with implication and mutual dislike. Astoria was seething with barely veiled resentment, her teeth flashing faintly as she glared up at her husband.

"The Dark Lord has been quite specific that the Mudblood takes precedence over everything else," Malfoy said with a cold expression.

Astoria gave a sharp, hysterical laugh.

"Goodness, I didn't know heirs were so important," she said glancing over at Hermione's stomach.

"The Dark Lord's instructions are what is important," Malfoy said, beginning to appear bored. He wasn't even looking at his wife, in fact Hermione realised, he was looking over Astoria's head and

staring at a mirror on the wall that reflected himself and Hermione. “If he asked me to farm flobberworms I would be doing it with equal devotion.”

Hermione nearly snorted.

“I haven’t noticed any of the other broodmares needing so much devotion. You don’t even let anyone near her. It’s like you’re hoarding her,” Astoria retorted sharply.

Malfoy chuckled, a cruel glint entered his eyes as they dropped down to rest on Astoria’s face. A flash of uncertainty flickered in Astoria’s eyes as though she were caught off guard by the full-attention her husband was suddenly leveling her with.

“I was given to understand you didn’t want to lay eyes on her, Astoria. Was that wrong?” Malfoy said, his tone was light—almost cajoling—but there was a freezing edge to it. “Would you rather I trot her about with me? Take her along to the opera? Perhaps have her join us on the cover of the Daily Prophet next New Years? The whole world already knows she’s mine. Did you want me to reiterate it?”

Astoria paled visibly and glanced over at Hermione with undisguised loathing.

“I don’t care what you do with her,” Astoria snarled, then turned on her heel and stormed away. The instability in the air evaporated with the receding sound of footsteps. Malfoy stared after Astoria with an expression of annoyance. He turned to direct his scowl towards Hermione.

“You’ve irritated my wife, Mudblood,” he said.

Hermione looked up at him. He almost seemed to expect her to apologize.

“My existence irritates her,” she replied indifferently. She eyed him. “If you 'care' you could easily remedy that.”

He snorted and looked her over.

“That potion really does a number on you,” he said. He looked at her so intently it felt as though he were committing her to memory.

She met his gaze calmly. She wished she could be so calm without feeling like she were frozen. There were so many things about him she wanted to unravel and exploit; if she could only rein in her psyche and manage herself.

There was so much about him that made little sense to her.

If she could only get closer.

“I feel like I can breathe,” she said. “Like I’ve been drowning so long I forgot what oxygen felt like.”

Then she grimaced.

“The withdrawal leaves something to be desired though,” she added.

He laughed and his eyes finally left her face. “If I didn’t leave you on the floor retching you might make the mistake of thinking I care,” he said in a dismissive voice. Hermione looked at him.

“You seem surprisingly concerned about my thinking such a thing,” she said coolly.

Malfoy paused and stared at her again for a moment before a slow cat-like smile graced his lips.

“Are we moving on with the agenda then?” he drawled.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed.

“What was it again? Explore the South Wing, try to find the kitchens, look for a garden shed or stables, find Malfoy and try to find a weakness to exploit? Are we that far down already? You’re quite efficient.”

Hermione stared at him. She wanted to be angry but the potion had such a reaction carefully stifled. “You were in my head last night,” she said at last.

“I was trying to sleep but you were thinking rather loudly,” he said in a bland tone, picking a nonexistent piece of lint from his robes and surveying his foyer as though he were an interior decorator.

“Well, have fun,” he said after a moment. “The stables are beyond the rose gardens on the south side of the manor. And the garden shed is on the far side of the hedge maze. I have it on good authority that you cannot touch pruning shears or pitchforks. You might be able to try strangling me with a bridle, but somehow I doubt you could bring yourself to actually do it.”

He smirked down at her wrists before turning and ascending the staircase without another word. Hermione stood and watched him disappear down a hallway and then glanced around, mulling him over as she calculated her next move.

He had been reading her mind the night before. She wasn’t surprised but it made anything she did feel horrendously futile. He didn’t even need to wait to perform legilimency on her; he could just glean her schemes from the forefront of her mind.

She went back to her room and put on her cloak and changed into her boots. As she exited the manor at the veranda she began mentally counting upward by two.

Two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve…

As she counted, she let her mind meander, thinking lazily.

Draco Malfoy was an enigma. There were so many contradictions swirling beneath his cold facade. What were his ambitions?

Twenty-two, twenty-four, twenty-six, twenty-eight...

He seemed to be accumulating power without having any specific purpose for it.

He knew he was shackled by orders he couldn’t disobey. Marry Astoria, sully his bloodline with half-bloods, keep Hermione under constant supervision…

He followed Voldemort’s commands with devotion despite having no apparent taste for them.

What did he get from it? What was it that drove him? His power and status seemed pointless. He didn’t seem to be getting anything from it that he wouldn’t have as a mid-tier Death Eater.

Sixty-six, sixty-eight, seventy, seventy-two...

Of course Hermione might be missing something. He spent days away during which she had no idea what he did. There could be countless things he was doing that she had no knowledge of.

There was something she was overlooking. A detail she felt she knew subconsciously but couldn't place. Something… something. Like a puzzle she was piecing together, built from all the contradictory information she had been accumulating in her mind. One hundred and thirty-two. One hundred and thirty-four. One hundred and thirty-six.

She felt something in the back of her mind crack and a page of a well-worn notebook filled with her handwriting swam before her eyes.

"The fanfare is in the light but the execution is in the dark, the purpose being always to mislead. Intention is revealed to divert the attention of the adversary, then it is changed to gain the end by what was unexpected. But insight is wise, wary, and waits behind its armor. Sensing always the opposite of what it was to sense and recognizing at once the real purpose of the trick, it allows every first hint to pass, lies in wait for a second, and even a third. The simulation of truth now mounts higher by glossing the deception and tries, through truth itself to falsify. It changed the play in order to change the trick and makes the reason appear the phantom by founding the greatest fraud upon the greatest candor. But wariness is on watch seeing clearly what is intended, covering the darkness that was clothed in light, and recognizing that design most artful which looks most artless. In such fashion, the wiliness of Python is matched against the simplicity of Apollo's penetrating rays."

Hermione paused wondering where the words had come from. It wasn't a book she could recall. She had memorized the words. As soon as she saw them in memory she recalled memorizing them.

The fanfare is in the light but the execution is in the dark.

She repeated the words to herself several times.

Then she started counting by three as she proceeded on her way through the hedge maze in the direction that Malfoy had claimed the garden shed was.

The day passed pointlessly, filled with counting. There was nothing useful she could find during her final exploration of the Malfoy estate.

The garden shed Malfoy directed her to was locked.

She did discover that Malfoy kept a stable of winged horses; enormous Abraxans, Granians, and Aethonens. All of which stared down at her through barred stable doors and stomped their hooves when she got close.

A dainty Granian was the only one who didn't step back when Hermione approached. It fluttered its smokey wings and shoved its nose through the bars, nickering and tossing its head at Hermione.

Hermione lightly stroked its velvety muzzle and felt the warmth of its huffing breath against her palm. If Hermione's mind hadn't been smothered she might have cried at the realization that a horse was the first warm and gentle thing to touch her in years. She stood for several minutes petting the horse's forehead and lightly scratching its chin while it nuzzled her robes in the hope of finding an apple or carrot. When it realised Hermione had nothing to offer it pulled its narrow head back through the bars and ignored her. Hermione lingered there for longer than she should have.

Hermione took to the paths and found the entrance of Malfoy Manor. Large iron wrought gates stood closed and would not open for her. Hermione wasn't sure what she would have done if they had.

She wandered across as much of the estate as she could.

Hermione found the family cemetery. Countless headstones and mausoleums buried under snow. The Malfoy Family was ancient.

Only one mausoleum was carefully cleared of snow. On each side of the door there were enchanted daffodils, blooming. Hermione studied the words carved into the marble.

Narcissa Black Malfoy. Beloved wife and mother. *Astra inclinant, sed non obligant.*

A large headstone for Bellatrix Lestrange stood nearby. The Black Family crest adorning the marble. *Toujours Pur.*

Hermione left the cemetery and continued exploring the estate. It felt endless. Isolated. Uninterrupted snowy hills stretching out as far as she could see, blindingly white under the clear blue sky. When night fell Hermione continued wandering, staring up at the constellations until she felt the potion's effects begin fading away.

She felt so ill the next morning she thought she was dying. She vomited off the side of the bed and it took her hours before she could drag herself into the bathroom. She didn't know if she could become immune to the potion but she didn't think it was possible to continue surviving it to find out. Even if Malfoy sent it she doubted she'd be able to handle dosing herself again.

She was sick for two days, pressed against the window as she shivered and sweated the potion from her system. Mulling over Malfoy and the drawing room in the South Wing again and again when she wasn't too feverish to even think coherently. On the second night she dreamt of Ginny.

Ginny was huddled next to a bed and quietly sobbing. She turned sharply when Hermione entered the room. Ginny's expression as she turned and caught sight of Hermione was anguished, her chest was stuttering sharply and ragged breaths were being gasped rapidly through her open mouth. Even her red hair was wet with tears.

As Hermione approached Ginny's hair slipped back and exposed a long, cruel scar twisting down the side of her face from her forehead down to the jaw.

"Ginny," Hermione said. "Ginny, what's wrong? What happened?" "I don't know—" Ginny forced the words out and then started crying harder.

Hermione knelt down next to her friend and hugged her.

"Oh god, Hermione—," Ginny gasped. "I don't know how—" Ginny broke off as she struggled to breathe. Choked hiccoughing sounds emerged from deep in her throat as she struggled against her spasming lungs. "It's alright. Breathe. You need to breathe. Then tell me what's wrong and I'll help you," Hermione promised as she ran her hands up and down Ginny's shoulders. "Just breathe. In to a count of four. Hold it. And then out through your nose for a count of six. We'll build up to that. I'll breathe with you. Alright? Come on, breathe with me. I've got you."

Ginny just cried harder.

“It’s alright,” Hermione kept saying as she started taking deep demonstrative breaths for Ginny to follow. She held Ginny tight in her arms so that the younger girl would feel Hermione’s chest expanding and contracting slowly as a subconscious cue.

Ginny kept crying for several more minutes before her sobs slowed and her breathing slowly began mirroring Hermione’s.

“Do you want to tell me what’s wrong or would you rather I go get someone else?” Hermione asked when she was sure Ginny was not going to keep hyperventilating.

“No—you can’t—,” Ginny said immediately. “Oh god! I don’t—“

Ginny started sobbing into Hermione’s shoulder again.

She was still crying when Hermione woke from the dream.

Hermione replayed the memory in her mind.

Ginny had rarely cried. When Percy died she had cried for days but as the war wore on her tears had dried up along with everyone else’s. Ginny had barely cried when Arthur was cursed or when George nearly died.

Hermione couldn’t remember Ginny ever crying so much.

Hermione kept turning the memory over and over in her mind, trying to make sense of it.

She couldn’t remember the scar on Ginny’s face. It had appeared to be several months old in the memory but Hermione had no recollection of when Ginny could have gotten it. It had looked like someone had crudely carved out a section of Ginny’s face with a knife.

Hermione wondered if she had been the one who healed it.

Chapter End Notes

The quote is from The Art of Discretion by Baltasar Gracian.

Astra inclinant, sed non obligant = the stars incline us, they do not bind us.

Chapter 15

Hermione was fertile again.

The table reappeared in the middle of the floor and she felt resigned by the sight. It had started to feel inevitable.

Inevitable.

Hermione realised with a dropping sensation that she was growing accustomed to her cage.

Malfoy was going to rape her over a table and the thought had become matter-of-fact to her. Even the word rape had started to feel faintly inaccurate.

Everything had started to feel—

Less.

Physically and mentally the dread had begun to fade as her mind forced her to adapt. She didn't feel nauseated. Her heart didn't pound painfully. The wrenching sensation in her stomach didn't feel so oppressive she thought she might be choking from it.

Her mind was twisting itself up with rationalisation. Trying to make her adapt. To make her survive.

If her situation ceased to chafe, she would be less likely to risk an escape attempt. Less likely to provoke Malfoy.

She could understand it scientifically. From the perspective of a healer, she could explain the physiology and psychology of it. It was unsustainable to remain in a state of constant fear, constant horror, constant dread. Her body couldn't keep her in a permanent state of fight or flight. She would either be forced to adapt or she'd burn out. The potion Malfoy had dosed her with had probably aided in dulling it.

Understanding the science didn't make the realisation better. It made it worse. She knew where her mind was headed.

She was 'acclimatising to the manor.'

The thought shook her to the core.

She stared at the table and felt at a loss as to what to do about it. It wasn't as though she could fight him. She couldn't resist any more than she already was.

He wasn't doing anything that hurt. If she paid attention—stopped pulling her mind away—it would likely make it worse rather than better. She had to escape. That was all there was to it. She had to escape. Had to find a way. There had to be a way. No cage was perfect. No one was perfect. There had to be something in Malfoy to exploit. She just had to find out what it was.

She had to. She had to.

She kept repeating the resolution to herself even as she walked across the room and leaned across the table. Feet apart. Don't think about it, she told herself. Worse things could happen if she let

herself think about it.

"I'm going to escape," she promised herself. "I'm going to go somewhere where people are kind and warm and I am free."

She squeezed her eyes shut and mouthed the promise to herself again and again until she heard the door click.

She watched the days of January slip by.

Malfoy came for five days. On the sixth day, he arrived and wordlessly inspected her memories. He seemed preoccupied.

Then she was left to her own devices.

She folded origami. She explored the manor. She explored the estate. She read the newspaper.

Reports on the war efforts were getting relegated to smaller columns. Public fascination with the surrogates was slowly beginning to swallow the society pages. They were appearing more and more frequently in public; trotted about, taken along to the opera; treated as though they were exotic pets. Pictures of their bonneted figures were being featured along with aggressive gossiping; was it swelling or merely the fit of their robes? Unnamed sources said suggestive things like 'there's a chance the Flints will be adding a name to the family tapestry by the end of the year.'

Healer Stroud was tight-lipped with reporters which only served as fuel for further speculation.

Hermione's panic attacks almost seemed a thing of the past. She had measured out her limitations and tried not to exceed them. When she remained focused and occupied herself with studying portraits and exploring the manor and the grounds she was able to stay calm; when she tried not to think about the war and how everyone was dead.

She gradually got so good at keeping herself preoccupied that she would momentarily forget that she was forgetting. She'd breathe in and experience a moment that didn't feel broken or grieving or despairing.

When it was just her loneliness that stretched out before her.

The guilt that would strike her a moment later was as cold and bitter as seawater. She'd freeze for a moment and then swallow the lump of horror in her throat and renew her vow to escape.

But she couldn't escape.

She explored the manor from top to bottom. She found a set of wizard's chess and played matches against herself. She built card towers with packs of cards she discovered in a drawer. She visited the horses.

There was no way to escape.

She tried to find Malfoy but never managed to. She didn't know if he were even in the manor. He could have been out or just behind a door she couldn't open. It sometimes felt as though he must be avoiding her.

She had no idea how she could possibly escape. Hermione began to see Astoria with increasing

regularity. The familiar click of heels in the distance and Hermione grew adept at promptly disappearing behind a curtain or into a servants' passage.

The servants' passages were filled with cleverly concealed peepholes. Hermione suspected that, given the utilisation of house-elves, the twisty little tunnels had always been primarily used for spying. The manor was crammed with them; some were obvious and others extremely well concealed. Hermione found them all. Anytime the dimensions of a room seemed vaguely off Hermione set to work, tapping lightly along the walls and pressing every knot in the wood and twisting at every sconce and screw until she felt something give. Some doors appeared magically while others were cleverly built using gears and rotating furniture.

Astoria was rarely alone when Hermione saw her. She was accompanied by the same dark, broad-shouldered man Hermione had glimpsed on New Year's. It soon became apparent that either Astoria or her paramour had some sort of objection to beds. The first time Hermione encountered them Astoria was nearly naked and pressed against a parlour window.

They seemed to be trying to have sex in every room in the manor.

Hermione did her best to avoid them. She didn't particularly fancy the thought of Malfoy using her memories to watch as his wife was shagged from all angles. Hermione entertained the notion of watching just to spite him but then dismissed it; Malfoy didn't appear to care about what Astoria did, it would probably have no effect on him. It would just be extremely uncomfortable for Hermione.

Whenever Hermione stumbled across Astoria mid-coitus she would quickly avert her eyes and slip away.

For a time she merely caught glimpses of the amorous pair while fleeing but eventually Hermione came across them both fully clothed. Hermione had been wandering through the topmost floor of the North Wing when she caught sight of them strolling along the gravel path running along the hedge maze. Astoria was speaking animatedly, and as she spoke the man beside her turned and stared up at the North Wing. As Hermione watched, she finally caught sight of his face.

Graham Montague.

Hermione stared down in shock as his eyes carefully scanned the lower windows of the North Wing. When he craned his head back further Hermione stepped sharply back and out of sight.

Hermione's heart was suddenly pounding.

Graham Montague was Astoria's lover. Montague, who had just 'happened' to come across Hermione during a New Year's Eve party. Who had expected Hermione to immediately recognize him.

He was having an affair with Astoria. He was visiting the manor almost daily. He was looking up toward the windows where Hermione's room was with an expression of intense determination.

Was it all a coincidence? Could it possibly be a coincidence?

Hermione reviewed all the scenarios she could think of.

What did she know of him? Slytherin. Former member of the Inquisitorial Squad. Badly injured by Fred and George. At some point during the war Hermione had known him and forgotten it. He was

having an affair with Astoria. He seemed to be looking for Hermione.

Was he a Death Eater? Hermione didn't know. Unless he had been working in the Ministry he would have had to join Voldemort's army in some capacity. He seemed too high socially to have been merely a snatcher and he hadn't demonstrated much familiarity with Ministry officials at the New Year's party.

Hermione replayed everything she could recall from the night. She'd been so absorbed watching Malfoy and then the surrogates she hadn't connected that Astoria and Montague had been missing at the same time. When she'd watched him later in the evening he'd been mingling, but he'd seemed most familiar with Marcus Flint and Adrian Pucey.

Despite her uncertain memory regarding the war Hermione was fairly certain that Flint and Pucey had been, last she recalled, mid-tier, unmarked Death Eaters.

Earning a Dark Mark had been considered significant distinction; an admission into Voldemort's most select inner-circle. As Voldemort's hold on Europe had grown more certain he had Marked fewer and fewer followers.

Therefore the logical conclusion was that Montague was also a Death Eater. Marked or unmarked she didn't know.

But that didn't explain why he would have any interest in or acquaintance with Hermione. Unless....

Could he—

Hermione was half afraid to even contemplate the notion; to allow the thought to exist in her mind where Malfoy might find it, but she couldn't stop herself from thinking it.

Could Montague have been a spy for the Resistance? Could he still be? Could that be what he'd been trying to communicate to her before he'd left with Malfoy?

She started watching Astoria and Montague carefully whenever they weren't having sex. She spied on them from the secret passages and grew increasingly convinced that Montague had ulterior motives for being in the manor. He was extremely interested in the house and his eyes wandered strangely whenever Astoria was distracted.

Hermione weighed the risk of trying to approach him. He was rarely alone. Astoria didn't ever seem to go more than a few yards away from him.

On the few occasions when Hermione did spot him alone she hesitated. He felt so unfamiliar. Surely, if he were someone she trusted, she'd feel it instinctively.

She tried to reason with herself. If he were a member of the Resistance and she were to approach him prematurely she might expose him. If he didn't have a way to remove the manacles it would all be futile.

Hermione decided to bide her time and continue watching. Better unconfirmed suspicions than anything concrete for Malfoy to get from her. She kept wavering.

Healer Stroud came and found that Hermione was, once again, not pregnant. Her expression as she surveyed the diagnostic result seemed irritated. Hermione stared determinedly at the clock on the

wall.

"Why are your sodium levels so low?" Healer Stroud asked after performing several more tests on Hermione.

Hermione glanced over. "They don't provide any salt with the food."

"They don't?" Healer Stroud said in a tone of surprise. "What are they feeding you?"

Hermione shrugged. "Boiled things. Vegetables and meat and eggs. And rye bread."

"Why?"

"I assumed it was what they were instructed to feed me. It's not as though I have the freedom to question anything," Hermione said coldly.

"You're supposed to have a balanced diet. That includes salt," Healer Stroud said with an expression of annoyance. She reached forward and tapped the manacle on Hermione's wrist with the tip of her wand.

A minute later Malfoy entered with a scowl.

"You called?" he said.

"Yes. Is there a reason why she isn't being given any salt?" Healer Stroud said.

Malfoy blinked. "Salt?"

"She says her food is all boiled and has no salt. It's starting to affect her sodium levels," Healer Stroud said, her eyes narrowed as she stared at Malfoy.

Malfoy's eyebrows went up in apparent surprise.

"The elves were instructed to provide her with meals. I assumed she was eating what Astoria and I do," he said. Then his jaw clenched slightly and his own eyes narrowed. "Astoria's responsible for approving the menu. I'll find out what happened."

"Please do. The Dark Lord is growing impatient over the lack of progress. We don't want anything interfering."

"Indeed," Malfoy said coolly, meeting Healer Stroud's gaze. "Now, if there's nothing else, I must return to my work."

"Of course, High Reeve, I won't keep you," Healer Stroud said giving him a final look before turning back to Hermione.

That night Hermione received a full meal with side dishes and a fresh salad, seasonings and, most significantly to her, a salt shaker.

She hadn't realised how much she had missed salt until she finally had it again. In retrospect it wasn't exactly surprising to realise Astoria had decided to order the house-elves to keep Hermione on some kind of—prison food? Peasant's fare? Hermione wasn't even sure what it had been intended to be. The woman was—odd. Her indignance over Hermione seemed to manifest in whatever strange way she thought she could get away with it.

And gotten away with it she had, for three months; approximately two hundred and seventy meals. Hermione never wanted to eat another over-boiled vegetable.

Malfoy entered Hermione's room when she was almost done eating, and walked over to survey the food on her plate.

"Apparently I am obliged to personally assure everything," he said with a scowl after the meal apparently met his expectations. "You could have mentioned it."

"If I were to start complaining, the food would not be the first thing I'd bring up," Hermione replied, stabbing a tomato viciously with her fork. He gave her a thin smile. "No. I don't suppose it would be."

He walked over to the window and stared out over the estate while she finished eating. She intentionally took her time, and mentally recited all the irritating repetitive songs she'd learned in primary school.

As she finished she glanced over toward him. She could see his profile and noticed as his eyes became briefly unfocused. *I hope you die the slowest and most horrible death anyone has ever devised, Malfoy*, she immediately snarled in her mind. After a moment he blinked and glanced over toward her expressionless. She met his gaze unapologetically.

"Noted," he said and then gestured toward the bed.

Hermione walked over resignedly and seated herself on the edge before looking up at him, unblinking as his cold silver eyes sank into her consciousness.

She always ended up flat on her back by the time he finished going through her memories.

He watched her memory of Ginny several times.

Then he watched her spying and wondering about Graham Montague. He withdrew from her mind.

"Montague got a Dark Mark after the final battle," he said, staring down at her. "It was, I am told, in acknowledgement of the exceptional services he rendered."

He was sneering as he said it.

"Did you provide exceptional services too?" she asked gazing up at Malfoy. She had no idea if he were lying to her about Montague; whether he would bother to.

He stared down at her and gave a cruel, rictus smile.

"More exceptional than Montague's," he said. Then the smile faded. He kept looking at her; studying her face carefully and then flicking his eyes down over the rest of her.

His gaze seemed softer and darker than usual.

She realized belatedly that she was lying supine on a bed before him. She felt her skin prickle. She sat up quickly.

He stared at her for another moment before glancing away and staring at the wall behind her.

"If you have any hopes involving Montague you should let them die," he said coolly. Then he turned

and left.

A week later Hermione had a new dream about Ginny.

Hermione was standing in her bedroom in Grimmauld Place when Ginny walked in. "You're back early," Ginny said.

Hermione glanced down at her watch.

"Lucky day," Hermione said.

"Yeah," said Ginny, looking slightly awkward. "Um. I wanted to—ask you about something."

Hermione waited.

Ginny tugged nervously at her hair, her face was unblemished.

"I—well—you, obviously know about me and Harry," Ginny said.

Hermione gave a short nod.

"Right. Well. The thing is, I want to be careful. I've been using the charm. But—there's something about Prewetts, they're not like other wizarding families. They just get pregnant somehow. Ron and I were both accidents after the twins came along. So—I was wondering if you'd make me a contraceptive potion. If you have the time. I was always rubbish at potions. If you can't—that's fine. I can ask Padma. I know you're terribly busy. I just—I didn't want you to think I didn't want to ask you."

"Of course. I'll be brewing tonight anyway. It will be an easy thing to include. Do you have a preference about taste? The most effective ones don't taste very pleasant."

"I don't care what it tastes like if it works," Ginny said boldly.

"Well, I've already got a few vials of one variety. I can give them to you now, if you'd like."

"You do?" Ginny blinked and stared at Hermione suspiciously. "Are you—?"

Hermione could see Ginny running a list of possible men in Hermione's life.

"You're not—with Snape are you?" Ginny suddenly choked.

Hermione gaped.

"God—No!" she spluttered. "I'm a healer! I keep a lot of things on hand. Good grief! What— why would you even—"

Ginny looked slightly abashed.

"He's just the only person you ever seem to talk to for long. Aside from Fred, who's with Angelina. Everyone else you just end up fighting with. And not in the hot and bothered, angsty sex later kind of way."

"That doesn't mean I'm shagging him," Hermione muttered, feeling as though her face were about to burst into flames. "He's a colleague. I consult with him about potions."

"You just seem lonely," Ginny said, giving Hermione a long look. Hermione started and stared at Ginny.

"You don't talk to anyone nowadays," Ginny said. "You used to always be with Ron and Harry. But even before you left to become a healer, you've seemed more and more alone. I thought—maybe you had someone. Granted, Snape would be a weird choice for a lot of reasons—But, it's a war. It's too much for anyone to handle alone."

"Cathartic shagging is Ron's thing. Not mine," Hermione said stiffly. "Besides, it's not like I'm fighting."

Ginny looked at her pensively for a moment before saying, "I think that hospital ward is worse than the battlefield."

Hermione looked away. She had sometimes wondered if it might be, but it had never been a question she could ask anyone.

Ginny continued, "I think of it every time I'm in there. In the field—everything is so focused. Even when someone's injured. You just apparate them away and then head back. You win some. You lose some. You get hit sometimes. You hit back. And you get days to recover if it's bad, or if your dueling partner dies. But in the hospital ward, every battle looks like losing. I'm always more traumatised after being in there than I am by fighting."

Hermione was silent.

"And you don't ever get time off," Ginny said. "You're on duty for every skirmish.They can never spare you, not even to let you grieve. I know, from Harry and Ron, that you're still pushing for the Dark Arts when you go to the Order meetings. I don't agree—but I get it. I realise that you see the war from a different angle than the rest of us. Probably the worst one. So—I'm just saying, if you had someone, I'd be really happy for you. Even if it was Snape."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"You should probably stop talking now if you still want that contraceptive potion," Hermione said with a glare.

Hermione woke in a state of shock.

Ginny and Harry had been together.

Ginny and Harry had been together and Hermione had no memory of it. There was not so much as a trace of it in her recollection. She'd forgotten it entirely.

Harry and Ginny's relationship had been something she'd forgotten...

Intentionally?

Was that what Hermione had been hiding? Ginny had still been alive when Hermione was imprisoned. Ginny hadn't been in the final battle. She hadn't been tortured to death alongside the rest of the Weasleys.

Hermione had thought Ginny was still alive until Hannah had told her about the High Reeve.

If Voldemort had known of Ginny's unique significance to Harry her death would have been horrific. Far worse than even what had been inflicted upon the rest of the Weasleys.

Hermione would have done anything to protect Ginny; stolen away her own memories to try to spare her.

For Harry.

For Ginny herself.

Ginny had been a constant friend during the war. Not close, but ever constant in her friendship with Hermione even when schisms had developed in many of Hermione's other relationships. Ginny and Luna and Hermione had roomed together in Grimmauld Place until Luna died.

But Ginny was dead. Malfoy had hunted her down and killed her.

Hermione felt like she was going to be sick.

Was it really all that pointless? She'd locked away her past to protect Ginny not knowing Ginny had already died? Hermione had gotten handed over to Malfoy, and dragged in front of Voldemort, and it was all to protect someone who was already dead.

And Snape.

Hermione had tried very hard since her release to not allow herself to think about Snape.

She'd thought he'd been on their side.

He'd trained her into a Potion Mistress. He had devoted countless hours of his personal time to do so.

Shortly after Dumbledore had been killed, she had descended into the dungeons to Snape's door and asked in a steady voice, "If there's a battle, what potions should I know how to make? That I probably wouldn't be able to find to buy anywhere?" Rather than sneer and slam the door in her face he had invited her into his office.

Until Hogwarts was shut down she had spent every evening until late into the night in his office, brewing one exacting, complicated potion after another. When Hogwarts was abandoned he'd continued to teach her at Grimmauld Place.

The enigmatic man had slowly seemed to thaw from pure exhaustion as he trained her. He had no energy for insults. He was hard and demanding but generous with his knowledge. He had seemed to be one of the only other people who was also bracing himself for a long war. He shoved stacks of his own personal, annotated potion texts into her arms to read and drew up maps of where to forage for her own ingredients when there would be few sources to buy from. In the middle of the night and early in the mornings he took her with him all over England. He would apparate from location to location to teach her how to find plants and harvest them so that the potency stayed high. He taught her how to build snares and catch and humanely kill the animals and magical creatures needed for potion ingredients.

He didn't even say anything when she cried after killing her first Murtlap.

He had trained her until she qualified for a Potion Mastery.

She had been his staunchest defender during the war.

Charlie Weasley grew to hate her for siding with Snape over almost anyone else. She'd defended Snape's methods and everything he did as a Death Eater as being necessary. She'd protected him when Harry and Ron had wanted to have him removed from the Order.

She'd considered him more than a colleague or mentor. He had been someone she had trusted implicitly.

It had all been a ruse. A clever ploy. Without Dumbledore to vouch for him he had cultivated a new champion for himself. Twisted her around his finger by being generous with his knowledge. He'd bought her loyalty with a potion mastery.

Then, once victorious, he'd cast her off. He'd had a chance to spare her from being included in the breeding program and he'd declined. He had departed for Romania and left her to be bred.

To be raped.

It was such a bitter and deeply personal betrayal she could barely bring herself to think about it.

She got up and read the newspaper.

Chapter 16

It was the middle of February when Dolores Umbridge was killed during the attempted assassination of the Minister of Magic.

A statue of Voldemort was being unveiled at Hogwarts prison to memorialise the Final Battle. Warden Umbridge was standing on a dais beside Minister Thicknesse while Thicknesse gave a speech to the prison guards, reporters, and a handful of ministry officials in attendance. As the ribbon cutting commenced, a crossbow bolt emerged from the Forbidden Forest, passed through the prison wards, narrowly missed the Minister and buried itself in the centre of Warden Umbridge's chest.

She did not immediately die. Shards of a necklace and the shaft of the arrow slowed the bleeding. The guards, being ignorant of barbed, medieval weaponry and basic medical sense, wrenched the arrow out. Then she died instantly.

The attempt on the life of the popular three-term Minister of Magic sent shock waves through the British Magical community. The Resistance terrorists had been regarded as wiped out. To have them re-emerge in such a spectacular manner brought chaos and had Death Eaters, dressed in full regalia, out in force.

Voldemort took the attack as a personal insult.

Montague's visits to the manor abruptly ceased. Astoria floated through the manor looking wan and paranoid. Hermione heard her shrilly asking Malfoy about exactly what kinds of protective wards were on the Malfoy estate.

Malfoy, when Hermione caught glimpses of him, was constantly dressed in something that appeared be a combination of combat gear and hunting clothes. He regularly returned to the manor covered in mud and looking pale with rage.

Hermione was thrilled.

She read the news coverage obsessively. The papers trumpeted loudly about how it was a failed assassination attempt, but Hermione considered Umbridge's death far more appropriate than the intended target. Thicknesse was little more than a puppet. Umbridge's sins were her own.

But the satisfaction of retribution was insignificant compared to the relief of learning that the Resistance was still alive. Hermione spent half an hour crying from sheer joy. She found herself feeling unexpectedly hopeful for the first time in a long, long time.

The knowledge gave her a light step for days afterward. When Healer Stroud came to see Hermione, her irritation that Hermione was still not pregnant became plainly visible. She cast a series of spells on Hermione and studied them thoughtfully.

"Well, your sodium levels seem to be improving," Healer Stroud finally said after several minutes of silence.

Hermione stared at the clock and said nothing. Healer Stroud rummaged through a medical bag and pulled out a large flagon of a purple coloured potion.

"Drink all of this," Stroud commanded.

Hermione automatically brought it to her lips even as she blurted out, "What is it?"

Healer Stroud waited and didn't answer until Hermione had drunk the entire flagon.

"Fertility potion. It shouldn't be necessary but I'm out of ideas. You're not going to enjoy the side-effects I'm afraid and it's going to increase your likelihood of multiple births."

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face and felt as though she might fall off the exam table. The flagon slipped from her hand and shattered. Healer Stroud promptly banished the shards of glass.

"Expect breast swelling and tenderness, headaches, mood swings and swelling in your lower abdomen. It may also result in sensitivity to heat and cause your anxiety to re-emerge," Healer Stroud said as she added extra notes to Hermione's file. "I'll inform the High Reeve."

Hermione swallowed and bit on her lower lip as she stared determinedly across the room at the clock.

Malfoy did not appear that day to inspect her memories. Hermione wasn't surprised; she had already anticipated it.

Voldemort. Every other month until she was pregnant.

When Malfoy arrived the next day he looked tired and angry. He didn't say a word as he gripped her arm and apparated with her into the twisting tunnels leading to Voldemort's Hall.

The Hall was even warmer and stank of rotting flesh. Hermione started gagging as soon as she took a breath. Malfoy seemed immune as he pulled her forward and knelt down, dragging her onto the stones beside him. The floor was damp and sticky, shimmering faintly.

The room was almost pitch black, only a few distant sconces provided any illumination. There were no other attendants or Death Eaters present that Hermione could see.

"The Mudblood, My Lord," Malfoy said. There was a long, slow sibilant sigh from the darkened dais and Voldemort's scarlet eyes suddenly appeared.

"Bring her forward," Voldemort said after a moment.

Malfoy pulled Hermione forward and up the steps before pushing her down onto her knees. Hermione stared in revulsion.

The throne Voldemort had been seated on before was gone. He was instead reclined across an enormous nest of pythons that were all twisted together into the vague shape of a chair. They were entwined beneath him, undulating lazily.

Voldemort cocked his head to the side and ran his spider-like fingers lightly over his chest as he studied Hermione thoughtfully.

"Ssstill not pregnant," Voldemort said in a menacing tone. "Unfortunately not, My Lord," Malfoy said, his voice apologetic. "However, as you will see, the mind healers were correct that time alone is sufficient to begin recovering her memories."

Voldemort gave an irritated sigh and a python head emerged from the moving mass of coils and

rested on his lap. Voldemort lazily caressed the snake and sank further against the sliding coils beneath him.

"Hold her," Voldemort ordered.

Malfoy's knee lodged itself between Hermione's shoulder blades and his hands wrapped around her jaw, holding her head in place. Hermione shook as Voldemort's scarlet eyes stabbed through her own and into her mind.

Hermione could feel Malfoy's hands wrapped around her throat and jaw as she shuddered with pain. It felt as though Voldemort's legilimency was a blade tearing through her mind. She screamed through her teeth.

It was slower. Instead of hot, blinding agony it was a gradual, more insidious pain. The kind that sank into the bones and the recesses of the mind and lingered.

Voldemort lazily tore her memories to pieces; like a cat, amusing itself with its prey. She hadn't known such a thing was possible. Bits and pieces of things he regarded as insignificant he destroyed just to feel her react. Her memory of folding origami while her parents debated eastern mysticism, her discovery of the Granian in the stables. He shredded them into tiny pieces as though they were paper.

She felt them go...tried to hold on to them as they faded away, but they slipped away until the agony in her mind made her forget what she was reaching for.

He was fascinated by her memories of Ginny. When he withdrew from Hermione's mind, she collapsed against Malfoy and couldn't see anything but the angry red of Voldemort's eyes. Could she see? Or were his eyes simply burned into her mind? Her brain hurt so much she almost expected to feel it dripping from her ears. Through the haze of pain that wouldn't fade away she could feel her pulse fluttering madly against the pressure of Malfoy's fingers.

"It's a pity you did not bring the Weasley girl back alive." Hermione heard Voldemort finally say.

"I am sorry, My Lord, I had no idea of her significance. As you recall, she was nearly dead when I found her."

Hermione stirred faintly and whimpered, trying to rouse herself from the pain to listen carefully.

"It explains the Mudblood's attack in Sussex," Voldemort said in a musing tone. "A suicide mission to free a dying friend. The Order always was surprisingly predictable."

"Indeed." The disdain in Malfoy's voice was overt.

There was a long silence. Malfoy's hold on her jaw loosened and Hermione felt herself slide down onto the floor. As she lay there, a cool, muscular coil of a snake began slowly twining around her leg.

"I am disappointed by your lack of progress in finding those responsible for the attack, High Reeve," Voldemort said. There was a whisper of fury lacing his words.

Hermione could barely breathe. The moist heat and the rot in the room was choking her and the scales caught faintly on her stockings as the coil tightened around her calf. The python was sliding

under her robes. She shuddered and tried to draw her leg away.

She could barely make out anything in the darkened hall. Her inability to see left her highly attuned to the sounds of the Hall; hissing and the soft shiver of sliding scales constantly shifting beside her in the darkness.

"I will not fail you. If it was the Order, I will find them," Malfoy said. His voice was calm and resolute. Deadly.

Hermione felt her lips tremble and tears prick in her eyes. She felt her hands shaking as rage cut through her pain. There was nothing she could do. Malfoy could hunt down and murder someone in the middle of her bedroom if he wanted to and Hermione would only be able to stand and watch. *I hate you, Malfoy. I hate you. I hate you.*

"It was the Order. Who else would have known? That fool Slughorn must have told Dumbledore. Potter must have known; that was why he broke into Hogwarts. Someone was overlooked during the purge. Someone significant to the Order. Not one of their ignorant foot soldiers. I am certain the Mudblood knows who it is."

As Voldemort spoke the sense of dark magic in the room grew thick, as though the air itself had become a solid, weighted mass bearing down mercilessly on Hermione. She could feel her ribs bowing under the pressure and crushing her cruelly into the stones. She was gasping as she tried to breathe through lungs that couldn't expand.

"Perhaps, My Lord, it would be judicious to recall Severus," Malfoy said. His words sounded forced. Hermione was not the only one being crushed to death.

"No..." Voldemort said in a cold voice. "Romania is crucial. There would be questions if we were to recall Severus over an attempt on Thicknesse. Severus will remain in place. Have you learned how the locket came to be in her possession?"

The pressure eased slightly and Hermione gasped and greedily dragged air into her lungs. The python coiled higher on her leg. She could feel the scales graze her bare skin above her stocking. A whimper of revulsion was torn from her throat and she tried harder to pull away. A coil closed around her other ankle.

"I have been investigating quietly. There are Ministry photos from '95 in which she appeared to be wearing it. She claimed it was a Selwyn heirloom. How she came to possess it no one knows, although a former secretary mentioned the Warden made a habit of relieving unlicensed peddlers of their possessions."

"So you know nothing. Not how the Order managed to destroy it from such an impossible distance. Not how they managed to identify it. Not even how she obtained it. Is there anything that you know?" Voldemort snarled. Then he subsided for a moment before saying in a calmer, more threatening tone, "You have disappointed me, High Reeve, I hope you have not forgotten what happened the last time you deeply disappointed me. *Crucio!*" Hermione felt Malfoy suddenly drop. He had not fallen prone but had instead collapsed into a crouch over her. She could feel his body shake rigidly from the torture as a deep, guttural groan was wrenched from the back of his throat.

Voldemort did not hold the curse for very long. In little more than a minute it stopped, the shudders against her ceased and Hermione heard Malfoy panting near her ear as he recovered himself.

"I will not fail you, My Lord. I have had the broadhead and the remnants of the locket examined by a goblin," Malfoy said with only the faintest tremor in his voice as he started to stand again. "The broadhead was goblin-wrought silver, infused with a combination of venom from a manticore tail and basilisk venom. The manticore venom enabled the bolt to pass through the wards—the basilisk venom to destroy the locket."

"Have you investigated possible sources?"

Hermione felt the whisper of a tongue slip across her bare inner thigh and sobbed quietly.

"A juvenile basilisk is easy enough for any wizard with a toad and a talent for blinding hexes to obtain with patience. The source for manticore venom is more questionable given how carefully most ingredients have been regulated since you seized control of the Ministry. McNair insisted that he be responsible for the investigation into it, which was unusually generous of him. I privately interrogated one of his assistants. It would appear that there have been ongoing discrepancies in the logbooks regarding the quantities of some of his imported creatures. The black market has been quite profitable during the last several years."

"Sssend for him," Voldemort said, the fury in his tone was overt. "The attack would have been impossible if not for his carelessness. Some of my servants seem to be growing hungry."

"As you command, My Lord," Malfoy said and Hermione felt him pulling her up from the floor.

The python coiled around her legs tightened its hold and dragged her back down. Voldemort gave a sharp hiss and it slowly released her with a sound of sibilant dissent. As Malfoy pulled Hermione free of the coils, Voldemort's face swam into her vision.

Several of the snakes had coiled around him. He was half covered in the pythons and staring at her carefully.

"That Mudblood is traced with darkness. The snakes can taste it. And she is quite fecund," Voldemort said, wiping his lipless mouth as he studied her.

Hermione stared back for a moment before her vision flickered away again. She could feel the faint tremors of torture in Malfoy's grip.

"Healer Stroud dosed her with some potion yesterday," Malfoy said. "As for darkness—well, the trail of destruction reported in Sussex already indicated that she didn't adhere to the Order's policies regarding Dark Magic."

Voldemort gave an assenting hiss.

"Watch her carefully. Now that the Order is moving again they are certain to come for her," Voldemort said. "You know I will die before I lose my hold on her," Malfoy said in a low voice and Hermione felt his grip on her arm tighten.

"I want their corpse, High Reeve. Whoever did it. This last Order member. I want their skull added to my collection."

"You shall have it, as I have given you all the rest," Malfoy said.

Hermione flinched and tried to wrench her arm free. Voldemort watched and she could feel the

cruelty and malice in his gaze as his eyes slid across her. He opened his mouth and slid his tongue out as though tasting the air. His gums were white and toothless like a snake's and his tongue shimmered in the dim light. When he closed his mouth he leaned forward and gave a low hiss.

His face was centimeters from Hermione's. She could feel the whisper of air ghost across her face. She wasn't sure if he were about to lick her or perform legilimency on her again. His blood red eyes studied her for a moment before he sank back into the nest of pythons. "Once the Mudblood has given up all her secrets, I want her killed too. She knows too much to be kept in Stroud's program. Although... if she is pregnant, I will permit you to wait until you have your heir."

"As you command, My Lord," Malfoy said without hesitation. Then he dragged Hermione out of the Hall.

Once they were in the winding passages, Malfoy dosed her with pain relief potion. Hermione scoffed quietly to herself before she swallowed it.

She tried to clear her head, struggling to see. She felt as though the air in the Hall had poisoned her. She slid weakly down onto to the floor. Her brain was still in agony even with the pain relief. Yet she found herself teeming with questions.

"I attacked a prison?" she forced out.

"After Potter died." Malfoy's voice emerged from the darkness. "A few hours after the final battle. You were captured after leveling nearly half of it in order to break in. It was an unexpected counter-attack. I only read the reports on the damage after you were assigned to me. It's a pity no one bothered to interrogate you sooner. The overconfidence of victory, I suppose."

Hermione looked up in the direction of his voice. She could only dimly make out his light-coloured hair before her vision slipped away again. She leaned her head back against the wall to steady herself.

"I was a healer..." she said. "I wasn't—they didn't let me—fight."

She furrowed her brow, trying to understand. "But Ginny got out? I got her out?"

"You did."

"But she was dying—when you—when you killed her. Why?" she asked, her voice small and pained.

There was a silence before Malfoy spoke.

"She was in Sussex for experimental research." A low sound of horror tore itself from somewhere deep inside Hermione.

"The Dolohov's curse development division..." her voice shook and trailed off. She made out Malfoy nodding in the shadows.

She doubled over and threw up. *Oh god, Ginny...* Malfoy waited for her to stop gagging before he dragged her up off the floor and apparated back into her room in his manor.

The noise she made from the pain of the apparition was animal. She collapsed against Malfoy and discovered she was soaked in what appeared to be shiny, putrefied remains. She could only see it for

a moment before her vision wobbled away again. She choked back a sob and tried blindly to wipe her hands off on her equally soiled robes.

Malfoy muttered several cleaning charms and the smell around her faded. He shoved her back onto her bed.

"Three days," he said and she vaguely heard him leave.

Hermione wanted to stay conscious. So she could grieve and try to process what she had learned, but her mind felt faded. Like she couldn't quite reach...

She pulled on her clothes until the buttons tore off and then shoved them onto the floor. She peeled the stockings off with her toes and tried to rub away the sensation of snake coils from her skin.

It was two days before she could see reliably. The pain in her head prevented her from keeping any food down. The room swam when she tried to sit up or stand.

She had nothing to do but think.

When Malfoy walked in on the third day she forced herself to sit up and look at him steadily.

"More questions?" he said coolly as he surveyed her.

Hermione shook her head. He looked faintly surprised.

"Well, one, I suppose," she said after a minute.

Malfoy waited. She gathered up the threads of information; all the inconsistencies she had collected in her mind over the months. She had finally drawn them up into something cohesive.

Hermione took a slow breath before she spoke. Then she met his eyes.

The fanfare is in the light but the execution is in the dark.

"The war has stalled," she said. "Even though it's still officially ongoing in parts of wizarding Europe. It's not being treated as significant or consequential anymore. In fact, based on the coverage, I suspect that there is likely to be an armistice announced soon. In the past two years, aside from conquering Britain, there has been almost no progress since Harry died."

Malfoy was silent; his expression carefully closed.

"In fact, almost nothing has happened since Harry died. Voldemort's entire campaign stalled once he defeated Harry. Because..." she hesitated only slightly, "there was something connecting them. They were tethered somehow, probably from when he tried to kill Harry as a baby. That was why he and Harry would end up in each other's dreams sometimes and, I'm sure you remember how Harry could speak parseltongue. That's why when Voldemort used the Killing Curse—to kill Harry at Hogwarts—it didn't work at first—" Hermione's voice cracked and she swallowed hard and forced herself to continue. There was a new pain slowly starting to bloom through the back of her mind. She ignored it.

"That's why he had to recast the curse on Harry. Because of the tether. But—it wasn't just Harry. The way he's immortal...Professor Quirrell, the diary your father had...somehow your master figured out how to bind his lifesource to animate and inanimate objects. And the Order knew about it. That's

why he knows the attack this month was the Order and not some new Resistance group. Because the assassination attempt wasn't an attempt. Thicknesse wasn't the target. Umbridge wasn't either. The pendant she sometimes wore. The locket. I saw it when she was training us. It was his. One of his tethers. Whoever it is, the last Order member, they figured out what it was and killed her to destroy it."

There was the faintest narrowing of Malfoy's eyes. Hermione cocked her head to the side as they studied each other.

"I believe I missed the question," Malfoy said after a moment.

"I haven't asked it yet," Hermione said calmly, trying to ignore the throbbing in the back of her head that was steadily growing as though there were a scalpel being driven into the base of her skull.

"The repopulation effort," she said, trying to breathe through the pain, "is a cover. It's a ruse. Voldemort doesn't care about the magical population. It's a piece of misdirection to keep the public preoccupied. He isn't waiting to enslave the muggles because he's concerned over wizarding demographics. He's doing it to buy himself time; he's entertaining the masses by making public spectacles of the pureblood families. First with the marriages and the miscarriages, and now, with surrogates. He didn't halt the war because he wants to, he did it because he has to."

Pain shot through Hermione's head and the room before her turned a horrifying shade of red as though there was blood streaming down and filling her vision. She gave an agonized cry started to fall forward. She forced herself to look up at Malfoy. He was moving toward her.

She forced her question out.

"He's dying. Isn't he?"

Chapter 17

Hermione was on the third floor in Grimmauld Place. The hallway was quiet and dimly lit; it was either late in the evening or early hours of the morning. As she passed one of the smaller rooms she caught sight of a shock of red hair bent over a table of maps. She paused and tapped lightly on the door.

"Hey Mione," Ron said distractedly as he moved pieces across the maps and then scratched his head absentmindedly with the tip of his wand. His expression was tense.

"Got a minute?" she asked.

"Sure." He stuffed his wand into his back pocket and looked up at her. "Just reviewing what's been happening since I left. Lot of raids while we were away; you must have been busy."

He was giving her a penetrating look. Hermione dropped her eyes.

"I'm sure you see the strategy," she said quietly.

"Kingsley's using the horcruxes to keep Harry off the field," he said.

Hermione gave a short nod. "You understand why, don't you?"

Ron's expression hardened further as he shrugged and nodded.

"No good risking him in a skirmish when we need him for the final blow. Yeah. I get it. That doesn't mean I like it. And some of these—," he pulled a few scrolls over and glanced over them. "They're pretty much suicide missions. I hadn't realized how safe Kingsley has been playing it because of Harry. Seeing what he'll do when we're gone for a few weeks—"

He broke off as he stared angrily down at the reports. "What exactly were the casualty rates while we were gone?"

Hermione opened her mouth to answer and he cut her off.

"I don't need you to tell me. I can see the numbers right here. Fucking—fucking bloody unbelievable. If Kingsley were here I'd punch him."

His face was growing scarlet with rage.

"Ron, we can't afford to play it safe anymore," Hermione said her stomach knotting itself as she thought about how many people's eyes she'd drawn shut during the past several weeks and the new hospice safe house she'd helped Bill ward. "I don't think you realise how depleted our resources are. How many years do you think Harry's vault can feed an army? The hospital ward is running on fumes. Europe is getting locked under Tom's control. The only option we have left is to take risks. And we can't risk Harry."

Ron was silent. Hermione could see the muscles of his jaw working as he kept clenching and releasing it.

"We need to find the horcruxes," he finally said. Hermione let out a low, deep breath that she'd been

anxiously holding and nodded.

"We do," she said. "Tom and Harry are the linchpins. Ideologically the Death Eaters are too diverse. It's Tom's power that keeps the army cohesive. If we can kill him, permanently, there should be enough infighting to give the Resistance the upper hand."

"I guess that's the one upside to Tom's delusions of immortality: he isn't bothering to groom a successor," Ron said woodenly as he looked over another mission report. Hermione could see her signature on the bottom; verifying the injured, calculating the losses in neat, impersonal numbers. "Although I don't doubt the Malfoys will think they're first in line now that Bellatrix is dead. Fucking psychopaths."

"You need to convince Harry that the horcruxes are the first priority," she said, staring at Ron intently. "Especially now, after Ginny. I'm worried he just wants to ignore them."

Ron expression grew strained.

"Yeah," he said quietly.

Hermione hesitantly drew closer.

"Ron, I hope what I said at the meeting last night didn't make you feel like it was your fault. You saved Ginny. I didn't think it would be appropriate to withhold the information but I didn't mean to hurt you by disclosing it."

"It's fine," he said, expression stiff. "You made the right call."

"I'm sorry—"

"Don't. I don't really want to talk about it," he said in a shaking voice that brooked no argument.

Hermione's eyes darted across his face, recognizing the tension around his eyes, the scarlet tipping his ears while his face grew so pale his freckles stood out like drops of blood across his face.

If she pushed he'd explode.

Hermione felt her heart sink.

"Right. Well, I'll leave you to review," she said turning to leave. Hermione regained consciousness and dazedly found someone leaning over her, tilting her head back. The right side of her face and body were rigid. She couldn't move her fingers and her tongue hurt as though it had been bitten repeatedly.

She jerked away from the hands upon her and the person, a man, stopped touching her. He stepped back eying her carefully. She stared at him in confusion. He was pale and blond and his face, which had seemed expressive when she'd first opened her eyes, was carefully blank.

"You had a seizure," he said in a calm voice. "Apparently fertility potions and legilimency don't mix."

He glanced down at a wand in his hand. "Can you speak? You were screaming for several minutes."

Hermione fought to swallow. Her throat felt raw, as though several minutes were a gross understatement. She tried to open her mouth and found that the muscles in the right side of her jaw

were so tight she could barely part her teeth.

She felt exhausted. She felt as though she'd been electrocuted; her muscles and tendons felt as though they'd been pulled taut until they'd been about to snap. When she tried to breathe there was a low, gasping sound that emerged from the back of her throat.

She tried to remember what had happened. She tried to sit up, but her body was uncooperative. She burst into tears.

"Who are you?" she slurred through her teeth when she finally stopped sobbing. She stared up at the man standing beside her.

A myriad of emotions suddenly flickered across his face. He opened his mouth, then shut it firmly and hesitated.

"I'm in charge of your care," he finally said, his expression blank once more. He pulled a small bottle seemingly out of nowhere. "You should take this. You'll probably be able to remember what happened when you wake next."

Hermione hesitated and then nodded in acquiescence. He slid a hand under her neck at the base of her skull and helped tilt her rigid body up so she could swallow it. As soon as she drank it, her exhaustion took hold of her fully, and she felt herself drifting off.

"Do I know you?" she asked as her eyes slid closed.

"I suppose you do."

When Hermione woke again, the right side of her body felt faintly sore and her tongue had the subtle sensation of a healing charm across the surface of it.

She cast her mind back, trying to remember what had happened.

She'd been talking to Malfoy about Voldemort, about horcruxes—she suddenly remembered the word. She'd finally asked her question; which had hardly been a question because she was almost certain she was right. Voldemort was dying.

Then everything in her head had felt like it had exploded, the room turned red, and she'd collapsed.

She'd had a seizure in front of Malfoy.

When she'd woke the first time she'd been practically immobile and hadn't even remembered who he was. He'd dosed her with Dreamless Sleep Draught.

She thought back on the exchange. 'In charge of her care' was a very generous way for him to describe himself. She snorted.

She shifted her shoulders and tried opening her mouth. Her jaw was sore but she could part her teeth fully. She sat up gingerly and examined herself.

She'd been treated.

Seizures were not her healing specialty, but Arthur Weasley had suffered from them mildly after he'd been cursed by Lucius Malfoy. She had researched it. The treatment was similar to treating someone for the cruciatus, a treatment that she was quite familiar with. It was not exclusively wand

healing but magi-physical therapy; using spells and then massaging the knots and tension away by hand. Someone had touched her. At minimum they'd massaged the entire right side of her body in order for the tension and rigidity to be so thoroughly relieved. Considering that she felt almost normal, she suspected that she'd been treated on both sides from her jaw down to her toes.

She shuddered slightly, but tried to reason with herself.

It was healing. Just healing. She'd healed hundreds and hundreds of people. Treated injuries on every part of the body. An injury was an injury. Healing was healing. It was quite removed from any sense of sensuality or sexuality. Clinical. Bodies rarely even registered as anything more than something to heal.

But still... The thought that someone had been handling her while she was unconscious in Malfoy's house made her feel ill.

She clutched her blankets against her chest protectively.

She glanced at the calendar on the wall and found that two days had passed since her conversation with Malfoy.

She shifted and hissed, glancing down. Her breasts were sore and—enlarged. She stared in abject horror for several seconds before remembering that it was a side-effect of the fertility potion Stroud had given her. She grimaced and climbed out of bed.

Malfoy had used cleaning charms on her after bringing her back from Voldemort's Hall, but she hadn't actually washed any of it off. She gathered up towels and clothing and went down the hall to the shower in the other bathroom. A long shower relieved any remaining aches in her body. She tilted her head back under the spray and thought back on the memory of Ron she'd unintentionally broken open. Horcruxes. And casualty rates. And Ginny.

It always came back to Ginny.

Ron. He'd looked so gaunt. So ground down by the war. His hair had been streaked with grey even though he couldn't have been more than twenty-two. She'd forgotten those details. She'd forgotten how the war had eaten him; how physically the stress had manifested in him.

He'd planned missions with Moody and Kingsley. He'd taken his talent for strategy and wizard's chess and learned how to apply it to war. He'd been so proud the first time Kingsley had approved one of his strategies.

It had taken time for Ron and Harry and DA to accept that the war would be long. They thought the magical communities would rise up in support of the Order. That having witnessed Voldemort's defeat during the first wizarding war would imbue the Wizarding World with confidence in the power of Light.

But Voldemort had learned from the first war. He was more clever, wary, and cunning than he had been the first time around especially after the missteps of the battle at the Department of Mysteries. He limited his reign of terror to Muggle-borns, half-blood families and blood traitors. He seized the Ministry early and had the Order of the Phoenix labeled a terrorist organization. He had Dumbledore killed in the Headmaster's own school by a sixteen year old boy. Any confidence the Wizarding World might have had in the power of Light was quickly smothered. Muggle-borns and half-bloods

were a fragment of the wizarding population. It was easier for the established magical community to simply choose to keep their heads down and leave the Order to fight Voldemort alone.

It was difficult to fight a war as a terrorist group.

Even if you had money, going to Diagon Alley and accessing a Gringotts vault was hard. Ministry identification became required for buying anything, food or potion supplies; and buying large quantities drew suspicion. A person could be sent to the hospital after a battle but any injuries sent to the Spell Damage ward required St Mungo's to contact the DMLE; injured members of the Resistance were charged with terrorism, placed under arrest while convalescing and disappeared into one of Voldemort's prisons upon release from St Mungo's.

The Resistance was not prepared for how decisive Voldemort's initial sallies would be. They hadn't stockpiled. They hadn't put enough people into hiding and many that they did try to protect they'd failed to hide carefully enough. There was always some goodbye people thought they could get away with before they left, some small hint that Death Eater torture proved capable of dragging out from neighbors.

The pride Ron experienced when his strategies were used quickly faded as he discovered it was almost impossible to devise a skirmish without casualties. People were not reusable pieces on a chess board; when sacrificed they died. Horribly. And even if you did everything possible strategically to protect them, they didn't always do as instructed or predicted. And even if they did, the enemy didn't.

Ron tended to take every death and injury as his personal responsibility. The lustre of heroism and the envy he used to have for Harry vanished. War quickly sobered him and the understanding bonded him and Harry even more closely together; mending any fractures his past jealousy had created over the years. They became united in guilt, determination, and idealism. Closer than brothers.

There had been little room left for Hermione.

Hermione sighed and dropped her head down, feeling the water slide down her cheeks. Her lips twisted and trembled as she thought back to Hogwarts.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione: the inseparable trio....until Dumbledore's death, when Hermione had chosen potions and healing over drilling defensive magic with Harry and Ron and the rest of DA.

Her days were spent studying healing under Poppy Pomfrey. Her nights were spent studying potions with Snape. Her friendships fell to the wayside. Even her grades slid.

She had little time to devote to drilling defense spells. Everyone was studying defensive magic. No one else seemed to be worrying about injuries or how to counter curses. Or about being able to make the potions needed to heal injuries.

For a month following the Battle in the Department of Mysteries Hermione had taken ten different potions daily in order to repair all the internal damage from Dolohov's nonverbal curse. She had been lucky to have survived it. When Dumbledore died only a few months later, she had felt keenly aware of how vital a role healing and potions would play in whether the Resistance would survive the war long enough to win it. But she was the only one worrying about it. Everyone regarded her as paranoid. Hospitals were a neutral territory; if anyone needed healing, there would always be St

Mungo's to turn to.

But then they were terrorists. Hospitals weren't neutral for terrorists.

When Voldemort abruptly seized control of the Ministry, the first act of Minister Thicknesse signed was the Muggle-born Registration Act. It was a carefully timed and strategised move. The Muggle-born and half-blood aurors in the DMLE and Healers of St Mungo's were arrested and had their wands snapped before they could flee to the Order.

They would have been invaluable members of the Resistance if the Order had been able to reach them in time.

Instead, the "terrorist organization" found themselves abruptly cut-off from the world, briefly leaving Poppy Pomfrey as their most experienced Healer. Any fighters in the Resistance were brought to a boarding school matron to be healed of battle injuries and dark curses. Kingsley managed to recruit two general practitioner healers to set up a semi-functional hospital. However Voldemort's tendency towards punishing entire families, most wizarding folk were reluctant to leave their entire lives behind and ally themselves with the Order if they didn't have to.

The war was concentrated in Britain at that point. After the British Ministry of Magic was seized European Magical hospitals sympathetic to the Resistance secretly reached out and offered specialised training in healing dark magic and curses. Hermione had been the only person with enough basic healing knowledge to qualify that the Order could spare.

It had hardly been a question. The Order needed a casualty healer, if they couldn't recruit one they needed to create one; Hermione had the aptitude. She was barely given time to say goodbye before Kingsley had her smuggled out of Britain. She hadn't known when she would come back.

She trained obsessively for almost two years. She was reaching the end of her training when the Order's hospital safehouse was compromised in the aftermath of a skirmish. A Death Eater had grabbed ahold of Ernie MacMillan when he was apparating there. Once the Death Eater was inside the protective wards he immediately left and brought back several more Death Eaters.

Beyond the Fidelius charm the hospital had not been well protected. There was no evacuation plan. No guards. It was a bloodbath before the Order managed to gather and send in a response. The Order lost the two healers they had recruited, their healer trainees, Horace Slughorn, and almost every injured fighter convalescing there.

The Death Eaters left Ernie alive out of spite.

The Order needed Hermione back immediately.

Voldemort had allowed Antonin Dolohov to set up a curse development division; new and deadly curses were used in battles that required advanced spell analysis to counter. Hermione's specialty. They also needed to replace their potion master and Hermione had qualified to do that too.

Within three days, Kingsley personally arrived at the Austrian magical hospital where she'd been studying and brought her back to England. In her absence, Harry and Ron had reforged themselves into a duo. Upon her return the trio tried to resume their friendship but the two years had sent them in separate directions.

Hermione hadn't been able to share in the idealistic belief that Light, by its inherent quality of

goodness, would eventually turn the tide of the war. In her eyes it seemed to be steadily turning further and further against the Order.

From the moment she returned to England she lived in the new hospital ward that had been set up on the second floor of Grimmauld Place. She spent her days and nights watching people die; watching them realise they were going to die. Trying to save them. She sat beside them and explained as gently as she could that they'd never speak, never eat, never see, never walk, never move again. That they'd never have children. That their partner, spouse, or parents or children had died while they were unconscious.

She lived every day in the aftermath of the battles; breathed in the devastation until she was drowning in it.

She wasn't allowed to fight. She wasn't allowed in the field. She was too valuable as a healer and potion mistress. The Order couldn't risk losing her.

She stood endlessly in the aftermath of battles she had no influence over.

So she used what she had, her voice and her position as an Order member. She used her seat in meetings to urge the Order to expand training beyond defensive magic. She wasn't advocating for torture or Unforgivables; she had just wanted Resistance fighters to actually be given explicit rather than merely tacit permission to kill Death Eaters in self-defense.

She hadn't thought it could be a particularly fraught or complicated position to hold three years into a war.

It was.

Harry was adamant: they would not use dark magic; they would not kill people. The majority of the Order had fallen in line with Harry's vision.

Hermione had been the outspoken odd-one-out. It had steadily eroded most of her friendships.

It wasn't entirely surprising that Ginny had concluded that Snape was the only person Hermione could have been in a relationship with. Ginny had been right. Hermione had been almost entirely alone.

Hermione sighed to herself and turned off the shower.

If she'd done something differently, could it have changed the outcome of the war? If she had devoted herself to defense? If she hadn't pursued healing or potions? If she hadn't left for two years?

Would it have made any difference? Saved anyone?

A lump formed in her throat as she replayed Malfoy's taunt from months before:

"You didn't even fight during the war, did you? I certainly never saw you. You weren't ever out there with Potter and Weasley. You just hid. Spending all your time in hospital wards. Waving your wand about futilely, saving people who ended up being better off dead." She swallowed hard and pressed her lips together into a hard line as she stepped out of the shower and toweled off.

She paused a moment and stared at her reflection. She hated her reflection. Hated seeing it. She tried to avert her eyes whenever she encountered a mirror. She barely recognized the person she found in

the glass.

In her memories of herself, she'd been gaunt from stress and malnutrition. Pale from staying inside healing and brewing potions. Her skin had been pallid. Her unmanageable hair always carefully restrained in tight braids that she'd kept coiled at the back of her head. Bony and thin-limbed. Her eyes, large and dark, but with fire in them.

Now...

Her face was no longer gaunt. With adequate nutrition she had filled out so that her cheeks were no longer hollowed. Regular daily walks meant her color was improved with a faint natural blush to it. Without a comb or any hair ties she could only comb with her fingers and leave it to hang loose. It fell, in a riotous mass of waves and curls, down past her elbows. Her knees and elbows and hip bones and ribs no longer jutted out. She'd built up muscle mass exercising.

She looked healthy. Pretty even. Normal. Like a Hermione from a different life.

But her eyes—

Her eyes were dead. There was no fire in them.

The spark that she regarded as most intrinsic to who she was had gone out.

She was a vibrant corpse.

She turned away from the mirror and dressed.

The fertility potion affected the fit of her robes. The buttons over her bust pulled and she could see her nipples through the fabric. She rolled her shoulders inward to try to conceal it and pulled her hair over her shoulders.

When she returned to her room she found a lunch laid out for her. She poked at a cucumber salad and stared out the window. The snow had melted. The estate was comprised of endless grey. Even the sky was grey.

She was still staring out the window when the door clicked. She glanced over and found Malfoy had entered. He was wearing his 'hunting' clothes. They were clean, so her guess was that he was heading out rather than returning.

She stared at him. Without robes he was noticeably tall and lithe. The clothing was all black but his forearms, chest and legs had a metallic silver protective gear strapped onto them. Ukrainian Ironbelly hide body-armor, Hermione concluded after studying him for a moment; for spell and weapon protection, unless he had a dragon taming hobby she didn't know about. He was gripping a pair of gloves in one hand.

She wondered if he'd worn that outfit when he'd killed Ginny, Minerva McGonagall, Alastor Moody, Neville, Dean, Seamus, Professor Sprout, Madam Pomfrey, Professor Flitwick, and Oliver Wood. He probably always had it on under his Death Eater robes. Ironbelly hide was highly resistant to magic and almost impenetrable to physical attacks. In a duel, unless the attacker could land a headshot or used a killing curse, Malfoy would be difficult to beat. Someone with manacles blocking their magic would have no chance against him at all.

Then again, when had Slytherins ever cared about fighting fair?

His eyes met hers from across the room and he studied her carefully.

She crossed her arms protectively across her chest.

"Remember me now?" he asked.

"To my profound dismay," she said glancing away from him. He approached slowly.

"I informed Stroud about what happened. Apparently she didn't bother to verify that fertility potion wouldn't interact negatively with a legilimency session," he said with a faint sneer.

"I doubt the combination is something regularly studied by potion masters," Hermione said in a dry voice.

There was a pause and Malfoy pulled a newspaper out of thin air and handed it to her. She plucked it from his fingers with a curious expression.

"You've clearly been putting your reading to good use," he said as she unfolded it.

"Peace Talks in Scandinavia!" announced the front page.

She smiled to herself as she skimmed the article.

"How did you guess?" he said after a minute of silence.

She looked up from the newspaper.

"About this?" she said, widening her eyes innocently and indicating the article.

He rolled his eyes.

"No."

The corner of her mouth quirked.

"I'm a healer," she said, then glanced down at her wrists. "Or I was, at least. I specialised in healing dark magic. I know the signs of magical corrosion. Too much of certain kinds of dark magic and it turns to poison in the body. The body and the magic try to assimilate it. Once there's dark magic at a cellular level, there's no going back. The magic eats the body from the inside out."

She set the newspaper aside. "The magic is still highly potent of course. He's still one of the most powerful wizards in the world. But physically he's deteriorating. Even all that unicorn blood he's imbibing and bathing in can't sufficiently manage the symptoms. Lying in a torpor under a nest of snakes is just delaying the inevitable. Even if he's immortal, he'll be little more than a shade soon. He'll fade into ether. With Harry dead, he has no way to rebirth himself again. If all his horcruxes have been destroyed—he'll just—cease to exist."

Malfoy looked at her sharply and she met his eyes. "The tethers, they're called horcruxes aren't they?" she asked.

He nodded slowly.

"New memory?" he said.

She nodded.

"During the seizure," she said, leaning back in her chair. "The Order was hunting them. Ron and Harry were assigned to."

"Anything else?" he said, his voice low and dangerous.

"Ron was upset about the casualty rates. We were starving. I doubt it's anything you don't already know," she said quietly.

She looked up at him steadily, expecting him to immediately move to invade her mind. To verify it. He just stared at her.

She looked away. After a minute she glanced back up, hesitating.

He noticed her attention and inclined his head, arching an eyebrow.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt..." she said. "Hannah didn't mention him. Everyone keeps saying that I'm all that's left of the Order, but I don't remember—"

"He died a few months before the final battle," Malfoy said, looking away from her. His jaw rolled slightly.

Hermione had known—but she still felt a sharp ache in her chest when she heard the confirmation.

She felt sure she already knew the answer to her next question too.

"Were you the one who—?"

He met her eyes and nodded. "He was in my way."

Chapter 18

Hermione stared down at the square of paper she was holding in bewilderment.

She furrowed her eyebrows as she folded it in half, and then stopped, feeling at a loss.

She couldn't remember how to fold an origami crane.

She'd folded more than a thousand of them. Large and small. Day after day. She had distinct memories of folding them.

But somehow—

She couldn't remember how to do it anymore. She'd kept trying to, each morning after she read the newspaper, but somehow she couldn't figure out how to make them anymore.

She couldn't remember the order of the folds. Was it a diagonal fold first? Maybe she was supposed to fold it in half and then again? She tried both ways.

She couldn't remember. The knowledge was—gone.

She had none of her previously folded cranes to look over in order to reverse engineer the process. The elves always banished them all by the end of the day.

Hermione sighed to herself and set the paper aside.

It must have been lost during her seizure. Perhaps there had been brain damage.

The memory—the knowledge—had vanished from wherever she'd kept it. Like it had never existed. Except she knew it had. She remembered, distinctly, of being able to fold them.

No matter.

She didn't even know why she folded cranes. She couldn't remember when she'd learned it. Maybe in primary school...

She pulled on her cloak and headed outside.

The estate was dreary and muddy. Winter was giving its last gasps before spring. The windows were occasionally tinged with frost in the morning, but the days warmed and it rained in sheets for days at a time.

The rain was only coming down lightly so Hermione ventured forth.

She had gotten to the point that she could traverse most of the gardens surrounding the manor; as long as it wasn't too open. Open spaces she still couldn't handle. When she occasionally tried to force herself past the hedges and into the open, rolling hills, she felt as though someone were dissecting her; slicing her nerves out of her body and laying them out in cold and the wind. Her mind would just fold in on itself and leave her alone in a state of stark terror.

She couldn't—couldn't manage.

She wondered if she'd ever be able to handle it. Whether she'd ever recover from the agoraphobia.

The fear felt as though it had rooted itself deeply, twining inside and through her; from her brain and down her throat, wrapping around her lungs and organs like an invasive vine; waiting to strangle her to death.

On the days it wasn't pouring rain Hermione spent most of her time wandering the estate. She would return inside caked with mud and have no choice but to trail it inside and through the halls. Wizarding homes had no traditions of keeping door mats or boot-scrapers when a quick scourgify could banish most mud. Hermione muttered internal apologies to the house-elves each day.

Her days had sunk into a sort of dreaded monotony.

She woke up and had breakfast. She read the newspaper repeatedly. She had folded origami. She ate lunch. When it wasn't pouring outside she went and explored the estate for hours upon hours. If the rain was too heavy she only went out briefly and then exercised in her room until she was ready to collapse. She showered. She explored the manor. She ate dinner. Sometimes Malfoy came and performed legilimency on her. Sometimes he came and fucked her indifferently over a table. She went to bed. She woke up and repeated the routine.

Day after day.

There was nothing more novel than the news.

She never spoke to anyone but Malfoy and Stroud.

Knowing the breeding program was all a ruse didn't change anything. Knowing Voldemort was dying, that he had horcruxes, didn't change anything.

Not for her.

Malfoy was still spending all his time trying to hunt down whomever it was that had destroyed the locket. When he came to inspect her memories he had looked visibly ground down. He only explored her mind briefly, as though he were afraid of damaging her and causing another seizure.

Hermione began to suspect that Voldemort crucio'd him regularly; every time Malfoy reported that he still hadn't caught the culprit.

He wasn't, she realised, returning to the manor looking pale with fury; he was pale from the physical shock caused by torture. In fact, he looked like he was being tortured daily. The symptoms showed more distinctly each time she caught sight of him. He seemed visibly eroded; as though he were on the verge of a breakdown.

Crucio did that to a person. When used too frequently, even if it didn't drive a person insane, its effects could become long-term.

His hands twitched the way Hermione's still sometimes did. She wondered if he was getting therapy for the torture. Whether he had time to.

Surely he would; he'd gotten her treated after her seizure. He would probably use the same healer. He had to have one. He'd likely put a healer on retainer during the war. He wasn't the type to go sit in St. Mungo's waiting room.

She tried not to notice the symptoms; the pallor, the occasional spasms in his fingers, the dilation of

his pupils. She reminded herself that he was trying to hunt down the last of the Order; every time he came back tortured it was a sign that he had failed and the Order survived.

But it bothered her, as a healer. The deterioration; she couldn't stop herself from noticing it and gnawed inexplicably at her conscience.

She ignored it.

Voldemort was dying. Voldemort was dying and Malfoy knew and he had responded by climbing the ranks, and wiping out the Order. She had wondered why he was so slavishly obedient even in the face of having her as the mother of his future children, now she knew why. Of course he'd be willing to do anything to stay in Voldemort's good graces.

Ron had been right. Malfoy probably regarded himself as the successor. How could he not? The High Reeve. The Dark Lord's 'Hand of Death.' When Voldemort finally faded, who would dare dispute that Malfoy was next in line? There was no other Death Eater who could compare.

Malfoy clearly intended to become the next Dark Lord and unless Voldemort happened to kill him before then, Hermione fully expected him to.

She wondered what kind of Dark Lord Malfoy would be. What did he even want from it? Hermione still didn't know. Maybe she would never know. She'd always wonder and never understand him.

He deserves to die, she thought to herself. He deserved to be crucio'd. The world would be a better place if Draco Malfoy were killed or driven insane.

But the thought of him blank-eyed in Janus Thickey bothered her somehow. Passively watching the toll that regular torture was taking on him made her feel oddly guilty.

She couldn't do anything about it, she coldly reminded herself as she strode through the hedge maze, even if she did want to help him. Which she did not. He was a Death Eater. It wasn't as though anyone had forced him to become a Death Eater or to murder Dumbledore or be the one to kill off the entire Order of the Phoenix and a large percentage of the Resistance as a whole. He deserved every bit of suffering that went in hand with his servitude. More even.

If she didn't get to kill him, the irony of it being Voldemort who slowly did the deed was both fitting and satisfying to contemplate.

Mostly.

Hermione sighed and stopped walking, pressing the heels of her hands against her eyes. Trying to clear her mind and stop thinking.

It seemed that she had managed to retained a bit of a bleeding heart, even for depraved monsters. She'd always hated the mere idea of torture. It had bothered her to witness Umbridge's. Apparently she couldn't even enjoy Malfoy's.

Her next fertile period was made distinctly worse by the fertility potion.

As it approached her breasts swelled several cup sizes larger and without a bra to support them they hung and ached and were throbbingly sensitive. Her lower abdomen swelled in a way that made her look as though she were actually in the early stages of pregnancy. It was horrifying. Hermione found

herself suddenly vividly, viscerally confronted by the idea of pregnancy in a way that she had managed to ignore and avoid until then.

She cried. Her clothes didn't fit. She couldn't exercise, it was too uncomfortable. She felt extremely tired and on edge. She just curled up in her room and tried to ignore all the things her body was doing.

When the table appeared she found it somewhat painful to lean across it and feel her weight pressing down on her chest. She swallowed hard. Her entire body felt over sensitive, particularly in places she very much did not want to think about. When she heard the door open she focused intently on the pain, bearing down harder on her breasts than necessary and forcing herself not to pay attention to anything else.

Please don't get pregnant. Please don't get pregnant, she begged her body.

After the five days, when Malfoy appeared to inspect her memories, he seemed slightly less on edge. Not so deathly pale. Less recently tortured. She feared that it meant he'd made some of break-through in his investigation.

He examined her memories carefully. More thoroughly than the previous time but still without disturbing any of the locked memories. He did watch Hermione's conversation with Ron repeatedly as though checking for details. When he came upon her reluctant concern over his torture symptoms he withdrew from her mind.

"Worrying about me, Mudblood?" he said with a sneer. "I have to admit I never thought I'd see the day." "Don't take it as a compliment," Hermione said stiffly. "I felt sorry for Umbridge when he tortured her too but I'd gladly dance on her grave."

His mouth quirked with amusement. "Unfortunately the snakes ate her."

Hermione found herself smiling before she could stop herself. Malfoy gave a barking laugh.

"You are a bitch," he said with a faint shake of his head.

Hermione's smile vanished. "Some people deserve to die," she said coldly. "And the ones who didn't—you killed anyway."

He rolled his eyes as though she had merely critiqued his manners.

"I did what I was instructed to do," he said with a shrug.

"Do you tell yourself that to ease your conscience?" She sneered at him as she sat up on the bed. "When you strung them up and left them to decay? Did you think you were being noble?"

He gave her a thin smile and quirked an eyebrow. "Your Resistance was quite boundless in its hope even after Potter died in front of them. They were the sorts that would never believe reports of death based on Death Eater hearsay. How many more fighters do you suppose would have tried escape if they hadn't seen the bodies rot with their own eyes? Surely you don't believe in encouraging suicidal optimism?"

"Someone is still out there," she said. "Someone you haven't caught."

He smirked faintly. "Not for long." Hermione felt the blood drain from her face so sharply it felt as

though her head had been hollowed out. "Have you—?" Her voice shook.

"Not yet. But I can practically guarantee it," he said with cruel smile. "Long before the Dark Lord has faded, your last Order member will be dead and your precious little Resistance will never know they even existed."

"You don't know that," Hermione said fiercely.

"I do know it," he said, his expression became so hard he could have been carved from marble. "This is a story with only one ending. If your Order has wanted a different one they should have made different decisions. Perhaps some hard, realistic ones. They should have let go of their fairytale notions that they could somehow win a war without ever getting their hands dirty. They were idiots, nearly every one of them." He sneered down at her. "Do you have any idea how easy it is to kill someone when you know they're hoping only to stun you? Very. So easy I could do it in my sleep at this point."

Hermione stared at him, watching the way his mouth twisted in derision and the fury in his eyes as he spoke. "Who do you hate so much?" she asked. She still couldn't understand it. It seemed to defy the bounds of magic.

"Many, many people," he said with an insolent shrug. Then he smiled. "Most of whom are dead now."

He walked away before she could ask him anything else.

After nearly a month, Montague started visiting the manor once more. Hermione didn't bother spying on him. She had concluded that he probably wasn't a member of the Resistance or the Order. If there were any chance of it Voldemort surely would have sent Malfoy after him.

When she came back from her walk one day she found a half dozen House-elves on the veranda of the North Wing setting out a large table and arranging vast quantities of flowers everywhere. One of them immediately vanished with a sharp pop and a moment later Topsy appeared and approached Hermione.

"'Mistress is having an Ostara party this night. The Mudblood is to stay out of sight," Topsy said.

Hermione blinked and glanced around the veranda which appeared more like it was being prepared for a wedding banquet than an celebration of the vernal equinox.

"Alright," Hermione said and went and found a different entrance to the manor. She watched the preparations from the upstairs windows and concluded that the equinox was merely an excuse for Astoria to throw a party. There was nothing of the rituals or traditions apparent other than the abundance of flowers.

When evening fell the veranda was lovely, aglow with fairy lights tucked into the enormous bouquets of daffodils and tulips. Astoria must have had shipped from somewhere else, Hermione theorized, the Malfoy estate was still cold and barely hinting at spring.

Hermione watched the guests arrive, Death Eaters, every one of them. They were stiff and formal with each other until the drinks started flowing generously. When everyone was seated and the meal well underway Hermione stepped back from the window she had been watching from and grabbed her cloak. She slipped down a quiet hallway and out into the gardens. She could hear the voices

from the party over the hedges. If she could find a good position she might be able to eavesdrop. Perhaps someone would drop useful information about the Order or the Resistance. Or the other surrogates.

The Daily Prophet was always crammed with speculation but it was hard to ever know what might be true.

She followed the winding paths of the hedge maze. Her footsteps were silent. She hadn't been told not to come outside. Trying to eavesdrop on what was clearly becoming a drunken dinner party was a relief. Hermione felt—alive. Rather than feeling like a mechanical dead creature who passed day after day, folding origami, exercising, and waiting for a table to appear in the middle of the room for her to be clinically fucked on and then left once more for another cycle.

The veranda was just on the other side of the hedge from her. She could hear the voices clearly.

"She's got barely any fingers on her," came a voice. "Can't show off something like that. Creeps the fuck out of me. At first, I could barely get it up to take her, but now that she's up in the duff she's got the most incredible pair on knockers on her. Definitely makes up for the lack of fingers."

Hermione froze. They were talking about the other girls. Possibly Parvati or Angelina. They'd both lost most their fingers.

Some of the girls were pregnant.

"At least yours has both her eyes," came another voice. "Mine's a bloody horror to look at. I take her from behind or drop something over her face so I don't have to stare into that fucking hole in her head. Got a patch that covers it now, but still..."

Hannah Abbott.

"They're not meant for looking at," Astoria's sharp voice interjected.

There was drunken, braying laughter at that.

"You should see how I've got mine trained," another voice chimed in. "All I have to do is snap my fingers and she bends over. Her quim's so loose I prefer taking her in the arse unless it's one of the mandatory days. Must have been a slut back in Hogwarts, but she knows how to suck a cock. I have her under the table every morning while I eat breakfast."

Hermione felt as though someone had stabbed her. The horror she felt was physically painful.

There were many exclamations of admiration.

"You've got the Mudblood, haven't you Malfoy? Saw that nice big Prophet article about it. "

"I do," said Malfoy in a cold voice.

"The Warden hated her back in school. Probably came in pieces I'll bet."

"No," Malfoy said, his voice was clipped. "The Dark Lord wanted her kept intact."

"Lucky bugger," someone muttered. "Must be fun, staring into her little know-it-all face as you shove in. Does she cry? I always imagined she'd be a crier. I had so many fantasies back in school of pinning her down on a desk and reaming into her while she sobbed." Hermione's skin crawled and

she pulled her cloak around her more tightly.

"I've never paid attention," Malfoy answered in a bored tone. "What the Dark Lord commands I will perform, but there's not much to her to hold my interest."

Several voiced grumbled something about Malfoy but the conversation moved on.

Hermione's ears perked up. They were discussing the death of Umbridge. Complaining about patrols in the Forbidden Forest and what a bother the centaurs were. It seemed none of them knew anything about the horcruxes. It was disappointing if not surprising.

She kept listening.

Malfoy was getting sent to Romania. That was news. There were executions scheduled there and Voldemort wanted them done with ceremony. A demonstration of strength in case any of the other European countries interpreted the attempted assassination of Thicknesse as a sign of weakness. The High Reeve would do them himself.

Hermione wondered if that was the reason Voldemort had stopped torturing Malfoy. He would need to be in peak condition to show off his talent for murder in Romania.

There was mumbled jealousy about Malfoy's assignment. Hermione's lip curled. What kind of loathsome creatures got jealous that someone else got to go kill people?

"Are you going to Avada them all?" someone was asking in an awestruck tone.

"That would be the tradition," Malfoy said, drawling so overtly Hermione could practically see the eye-roll that was surely accompanying it.

She wasn't sure what was more unnerving, Malfoy's casualness or the other Death Eaters' enthusiasm.

The conversation wore on, offering nothing useful. Then there was the sound of chairs moving and people standing and Astoria was driveling on about the flowers in the hot house.

Hermione faded through the hedges back toward the other entrance of the manor. She didn't want to be stumbled upon if one of the Death Eaters decided to go explore the hedges.

She was nearly back to the house when suddenly,

Immobulus.

The hex caught her in the side of the head. She froze in place as a Graham Montague stepped through the French doors of the manor.

"Who knew slipping off to take a piss would make me so lucky?" He seemed to be marveling as he approached her. "With all the wards Malfoy added to your wing in the manor I was afraid I'd never reach you again. Has he knocked you up yet?"

He cast a pregnancy detection spell on her and grinned when it came up negative. "I never thought that getting Astoria host an equinox party would be the thing that finally worked," he said with a chuckle. He was studying her face, his expression was triumphant the way it had been on New Year's Eve. He unclasped her cloak and pushed it off her shoulders. "Fuck. You didn't have these

last time."

Her breasts were still somewhat enlarged from the fertility potion. He grabbed her left breast and squeezed it hard as he drew closer, so that their bodies were almost pressed against each other. He buried his nose in her hair, breathing in. He smelled sour from wine. Drunk.

"You were supposed to have been mine, you know," he said, stepping back slightly to look her over again. "I was the one who caught you when you attacked at Sussex. When I saw you standing under a sky full of burning dementors—I wanted to fuck you right there in that field." His grip on her breast tightened as he spoke, his fingers digging into the flesh. If Hermione could have moved at all she would have been gasping from pain. "That was how I earned my Mark, you know, catching you. My exceptional service to the Dark Lord. When I saw you at Sussex, I recognised you from the cave. Remember how I told you I'd ask to have you. I was the one who reminded the Dark Lord about you for the breeding program. He said you'd be mine. But then he changed his mind and gave you to Malfoy."

Montague hissed and twisted her breast hard in his hand. "Fucking Malfoy gets everything. But I owe you so much pain for stabbing me with those poisoned knives, I'm not going to let him get in my way. I've been fantasising about this for so long. I even bought a pensieve, just so I could watch you kneeling in front of me and unbuttoning my trousers as many times as I wanted."

Hermione would have been shaking if she could move. She didn't know what Montague was talking about, but she recognized the sound of cruel and obsessive revenge in his tone. He smiled at her and placed the tip of his wand against her forehead.

"We don't want Malfoy to come interrupt our fun now, do we? *Confundo*."

Hermione's mind blurred as the immobilising hex was removed and she collapsed into his waiting arms.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains attempted sexual assault, gore, and eye trauma.

There was some—

Something isn't right about this, Hermione thought as she was pushed against the hedge and her dress was ripped open.

Cold.

Cold air was on her.

Teeth were on her throat. It hurt.

She didn't like it.

She tried to push away but her hands were shoved roughly aside and then she felt teeth against her breast a moment before they bit down.

Hard.

She was crying—she thought.

Fingers were between her legs and stabbing into her. Poking her violently.

She tried to pull her legs closed but something lodged itself in between them.

So she couldn't.

She didn't think—

This wasn't supposed to—

The hedge was scratching her. Stabbing into her back.

Fingers kept digging inside her and teeth kept biting her shoulders and breasts.

Then she was on the ground.

She could feel the gravel of the path under her hands. Sharp, cold little rocks.

Something—she didn't want.

It was about to happen.

She just—

She wasn't sure what.

Was it something to do with Malfoy?

A man was kneeling between her legs. Montague. She stared up at him. Glazed.

Her fingers were twitching; clawing through the gravel.

He leaned down toward her.

His face was very close to hers.

Maybe he was going to tell her a secret.

Something was prodding her between her legs.

She felt she should know what—but she couldn't remember.

Something that wasn't supposed to happen.

A secret.

From Malfoy.

But—she didn't want to.

Malfoy would know—if she had a secret.

He was always in her head.

She tried to tell the man but she just cried instead.

Then suddenly the man was gone and there was a loud crashing noise.

She turned and found the man smashed into the wall of the manor.

Malfoy was kicking him so violently that there was a cracking sound.

Hermione sat up and watched. Malfoy picked the man up by his throat and pulled him up the wall until they were eye-to-eye.

"How dare you? Did you think you'd get away with this, Montague?"

"You didn't seem to care about having her, Malfoy," Montague rasped. "I assumed you didn't mind sharing, seeing the way you let Astoria out to play. The Mudblood was supposed to be mine. You cut in line. I was the one who caught her. She was mine."

"She will never be yours." Malfoy sneered as he made a vicious stabbing motion and sliced through Montague's shirt and into his stomach.

Without hesitating, or lowering Montague from where he was holding him, Malfoy shoved his hand inside Montague's abdominal cavity and started pulling organs out and winding them around his fist.

Montague was screaming and thrashing.

Malfoy drew out a handful of intestines far enough that they glittered in the moonlight.

"If I ever see you again, I will strangle you with these," Malfoy said in a voice of deadly calm.

He dropped the intestines so that they hung down Montague's front like watch chains. Malfoy scourgified the blood and other fluids from his hand as he watched Montague stumble away, whimpering and sobbing and trying to stuff his intestines back inside his stomach.

Malfoy turned back toward Hermione. His face was white.

"You idiot—why—did you come out tonight?"

Hermione sat placidly in the gravel and stared at him wide-eyed.

She thought she should say something. But—she wasn't sure if she remembered what it was.

Something about Malfoy—she thought. That's what she meant to tell the man. Montague.

"Malfoy always comes for me," she whispered.

He stared at her, his jaw locked and his fists clenched for several seconds before he appeared to swallow something.

"What did he do to you?" he said in a low voice, kneeling down next to her.

He tried several counter-charms on her before suddenly one clicked and then, like ice-water, reality crashed down Hermione

A strangled sob ripped itself out of her throat and she wrapped her arms around herself. Her robes were shredded and she could feel the bite marks all over her body. She couldn't stop shaking. Malfoy was kneeling beside her, utterly expressionless. He reached out slowly and took her arm.

"Let's get you cleaned up."

With a pop they reappeared in her room and he pushed her down to sit on the edge of her bed before turning and walking into the adjoining bathroom. There was a long silence before he re-emerged several minutes later, carrying a basin and wet cloth which he handed to her. Hermione had stopped sobbing and kept hiccoughing as she tried not to cry or hyperventilate.

Malfoy turned away and stared out the window while she tried to wipe off all the gravel and dirt sticking to the blood from the bites all over her. Some of them were so deep they were large crescents rather than tooth marks. She could feel the blood from them running down her torso in streams. Her hands were shaking so much she kept dropping the cloth into her lap.

She heard a hiss of irritation and Malfoy's hand suddenly snatched the cloth from her. She cowered back.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said in a tense voice as he sat down beside her on the bed. He reached out slowly and took her by the shoulders, turning to her toward him to appraise the damage.

His jaw clenched as he stared at her.

Moving slowly, as though she were a skittish animal, he started on her shoulders. Lightly wiping away the blood and then muttering the charms to heal the wounds. She tried not to flinch every time he touched her. He worked across her shoulders and then up her neck before turning to the worst ones; which were clustered on her breasts.

His lips were pressed into a straight line as he started healing them. Some were so deep and ragged it took multiple spells to fix them. His expression was clinical and intent as he worked. Hermione stared at him, still unable to control her shaking. He'd barely touched her until then. Aside from the minimal contact when he attempted to impregnate her, the only other times he had touched her at all

was when he'd stopped her from throwing herself off the balcony or when apparating her.

He worked efficiently and finally sat back and looked away from her.

"Anywhere else?" he asked.

"No," Hermione said strained voice, pulling her mangled robes closed and hugging herself.

He glanced over at her for a moment as though weighing whether or not she was telling the truth. Then he vanished the basin of blood and water and stood up.

"I'll have Calming Draught and Dreamless Sleep Potion sent up for the next week," he said. "I'm sure you heard, I'll be away for the next several days. You—should stay in your room until I return." Hermione said nothing. She just clutched her robes closed and stared at the floor. She could see his shoes as he stood beside her. Then he turned and walked out of her room, shutting the door behind him.

Hermione continued to sit frozen for several minutes. Then she stood up and went into the bathroom. She let her robes and dress fall off as she watched the water fill the tub.

She left the clothing on the floor and hoped the House-Elves would burn it all rather than repair and send them back.

The water turned red from all the residual blood on her and she drained it and refilled it, scrubbing herself until her skin felt raw.

She could still feel Montague's teeth sinking into her. The skin that Malfoy had healed was still new and over-sensitive. She fought against a temptation to claw at it.

She sat in the bath and cried until the water grew cold and she started shivering.

Climbing out of the tub and clutching a towel against herself she walked falteringly back to her bed. Two vials of potion sat on the narrow bedside table. She drained the Dreamless Sleep and crawled into bed.

The next morning she stayed in bed. There was no reason to get up.

She didn't want to move. She didn't want to think. She just wanted another dose of Dreamless Sleep. Try as she might she couldn't sleep anymore. She took the Calming Draught and felt the knot of horror in her stomach ease faintly as she lay curled in her bed.

She couldn't stop thinking.

Her mind would never quiet itself. There were always realisations, guilt, and mourning; something to obsess and worry over.

Montague...she didn't even want to think about Montague.

There was little from the previous night that wasn't horrifying.

She'd somehow assumed that the situation was the same for all the girls in the breeding program. That whomever they'd been given to would be treating them much the same way that she was treated. Clinically. Mostly left alone. The conception efforts entirely non-sensual for all parties.

But that was clearly not the case. It was obvious in retrospect that the surrogates had never been intended to be that way. Healer Stroud might consider the magi-genetic breeding program to be legitimate science, but essentially and far more fundamentally, it was a diversion. It made a spectacle out of the Death Eaters but it was also a bribe. The surrogates were sex slaves.

Hermione realised with a bitter pang that she had been so absorbed in her own situation she hadn't considered how much worse it could be for the others. It had always clearly been intended to be that way. No bra. No knickers. The way the buttons on their dresses popped off with the smallest tug.

Accessible.

The Death Eaters were required to rape them on their fertile days, but the instructions had made no reference to the fertile period being the limitation.

Somehow being given to Malfoy made her—lucky?

He seemed clinical about utilising her.

Perhaps it was simply because Voldemort didn't want her too damaged until her memories were recovered. Perhaps he wasn't allowed to hurt her, or rape her the way he'd like to.

But—that didn't seem right. He didn't seem interested. It wasn't like he was restraining himself. He always seemed eager to be done with her. To get away from her. She was a chore to him.

Was it possible that the High Reeve was the least inhumanely cruel figure in Voldemort's government?

That didn't seem accurate either. Not after what she'd seen him do to Montague. Watching him coolly stand there as he unspooled Montague's organs with his bare hands was— terrifying.

The matter-of-factness.

The ease.

Malfoy had plenty of cruelty in him. Simmering just beneath the surface, waiting to be let out.

Perhaps rape wasn't his thing.

A strange thought, but the most plausible one she could think of. He hated touching her; avoided it at much as was possible.

Apparently Malfoy was not a complete monster.

Not that it matter. None of it mattered. None of it ever mattered.

It was the same as her realisation that Voldemort was dying. Realising that it was worse for the other girls didn't make any difference. There was nothing Hermione could do.

Even if by some miracle she found a way to escape, which was itself a sheer impossibility, she couldn't stop to save anyone else. She had to run. She had to run and run. The best she could do would be to try to find whomever it was that remained of the Order and see if they had a way to save everyone else. But if there were any way to do such a thing, surely the Order would already be doing it. Surely the Order wouldn't have left the surrogates for so long if there were any way to save them.

Hermione couldn't think of anyone but herself. If she had the information Voldemort and Malfoy seemed to believe she possessed then the most vital thing she could do would be to keep them from ever getting it from her.

She needed to escape.

She was running out of time.

It seemed an utter miracle that she wasn't pregnant. She had been sure that after the fertility potion she'd be pregnant.

Once she was pregnant—

Hermione felt as though she couldn't breathe. Her chest and throat felt compressed, and she started shaking as she tried not to cry.

Her odds of escaping already felt infinitesimally small. Once she was pregnant they would be practically non-existent and would only grow smaller with every progressing day.

She couldn't even walk across a field or along an open road as it was. An escape with the additional and evolving challenges that a pregnancy would present would be impossible.

Once she gave birth, Malfoy would tear the child out from her arms (assuming he even let her hold it), then he'd take Hermione to Voldemort and kill her and she'd been eaten by Voldemort's vile pythons and her baby would be left alone in Malfoy's horrible house to be raised by him and his horrible wife...

Hermione's chest heaved and before she could stop herself she began sobbing so violently she choked.

Even if she did escape Malfoy would never stop looking for her.

There was no way to escape. Every idea she could think of, none of it panned out. She was like an insect, pinned to board.

The manor was a flawless cage.

Unless by some miracle she could convince Malfoy to let her go...

And there was simply no way.

She wasn't even sure if he could let her go, even if he wanted to. There was something about the way he occasionally eyed the manacles that made Hermione doubt that he could remove them.

He could only kill her. And he was already planning to do that. She rolled onto her back and stared up at the canopy in despair.

There was no way out.

She would never escape. She'd be pregnant soon.

And she would never escape. The wave of depression eventually made her fall asleep.

Hermione barely left her bed for the next several days.

She was staring out the window when the door of her room abruptly exploded and Astoria strode in, wand in one hand and a newspaper clutched in the other.

Hermione stood quickly, and Astoria stopped. They stared at each other for a minute.

Astoria hadn't approached Hermione since the night she had led Hermione to Malfoy's room. Hermione's fingers twitched nervously. Astoria had to be there because of Montague.

"Come here, Mudblood," Astoria commanded in a sharp voice.

Hermione crossed the room reluctantly until she stood only a foot away from Astoria. Her heart was pounding and she had a strong sense that the conversation they were about to have was going to end badly.

Astoria was pale. Brittle. She was impeccably dressed and groomed, but there was a sense of unraveling about her. The earrings she was wearing were trembling faintly and her eyes were narrowed into slits as she stared at Hermione.

"I know you snoop. Have you seen this story?" Astoria said, lifting the newspaper up so that Hermione could see the picture on the front page.

Hermione had been too depressed to even look at the Daily Prophet since the equinox. Her gaze dropped down to study the photo and her eyes widened.

On the cover of the Daily Prophet was a picture of Malfoy calmly disemboweling Graham Montague in the middle of the St Mungo's waiting room.

Hermione only could stare for a moment before Astoria twitched her hand and folded the newspaper in half.

"I have to admit," Astoria said in a voice of unnatural sounding calm. "When I first heard the news that Draco had publicly killed Graham, I thought 'he's finally noticed.'"

Astoria's lips twitched and she stared away from Hermione.

"I tried to be the perfect wife when I was chosen," Astoria said. "Draco Malfoy's wife. There was really nothing to compare it to. The most powerful general in the Dark Lord's army. All the other girls were so jealous. Of course it was arranged, but I thought he'd eventually realise that I was right for him. That I was a good wife. I did everything. I joined every board, every charity. I was the perfect wife. I was perfect. But he never cared."

Astoria shrugged and gestured carelessly with her wand hand. Her nails were painted silver and caught in the light.

"People don't know, but he didn't even live here. We got married and he—he just left me here in this house. Never so much as gave me a tour of manor. On our wedding day he brought me here and left me in the foyer; didn't bother to consummate it until I was supposed to be fertile. And then—once the healers determined I was barren—Draco didn't come here at all. He just—disappeared. I never knew where he was. I couldn't contact him. I thought maybe I could get his attention if I made him jealous but he never cared what I did. Eventually—I accepted that was how he was."

The bitterness of Astoria's expression twisted her face into something both ugly and terrifying.

"But then you came along." Astoria's voice shook with resentment. "And then he moved in and he turned the entire estate upside down in order to ward it and make sure it was safe. Took you for walks and gave you a tour of the house."

Hermione started to open her mouth to point out that Malfoy had been ordered to do all those things.

"Shut up! I don't want to hear from you," Astoria said sharply, baring her teeth.

The newspaper was crumpling in Astoria's clenched fist and smoldering faintly.

"And then Graham started paying attention to me," Astoria said, her voice trembled as though she were holding back tears. "He was so sympathetic and kept me company at all the events that Draco never showed for. He wanted to see everything I had done and he noticed all the things I'd done to impress Draco. He wanted me to show him all around the manor to see how I'd decorated it. He had the idea of a New Year's Party here at the Manor. And dinner parties. And even an equinox party on the veranda of the North Wing. He was very specific about it being the North Wing..."

Astoria's voice trailed off and she stared out the window for several seconds.

"When I heard Draco had killed Graham I thought 'Draco has finally noticed, he was just busy before.' But then," Astoria twitched, "it crossed my mind—Graham first approached me the week after the Daily Prophet wrote that vile article about you living here. He wanted so badly to come to this estate rather than go to a hotel or his townhouse. He was quite insistent. He had to see the estate, the manor. All the rooms, even if we had to break through wards to get in. Then it crossed my mind how Graham always tended to disappear; during New Year's, and the dinner parties, and the garden party. He was always... disappearing."

Astoria fell silent for several seconds. Hermione cringed, unable to speak; unable to clarify. She didn't know that it would make any difference even if she could. "It was because of you," Astoria said at last. "Graham came here because of you. Draco killed him because of you. Graham was just using me! He was using me to get to you!"

Astoria flung the newspaper on the floor. The pages sprayed out on the wood floor, showing Malfoy coldly murdering Graham Montague in a continuous, black and white loop.

Draco Malfoy Publicly Kills Fellow Death Eater!

" Why do they care about you?" Astoria demanded, stepping toward Hermione and digging her wand sharply into Hermione's throat. "What's so special about you that Draco would move here, into this house that he clearly hates? That Graham would spend months using me to get to you? Why does anyone care about a Mudblood? Why does everyone think you're so important?"

The glint in Astoria's eyes as she glared at Hermione was manic.

Hermione started to open her mouth and Astoria slapped her sharply across the face.

"I don't want to hear your explanations!" Astoria snarled. "I warned you. I told you not to cause problems for me." Astoria abruptly jabbed her wand up into Hermione's face toward her eyes. Hermione's chest constricted and she jerked her face away.

"You know," Astoria said in a trembling, lilting tone, grabbing Hermione by the chin. "Marcus says he can barely stand to look at his surrogate, because the hole in her head makes her a horror. Maybe

Draco would spend less time obsessing over you if you had two."

Hermione stumbled back.

"Stay still," Astoria commanded.

Hermione froze and Astoria drew close again.

Malfoy would come. Malfoy would come. Malfoy would come.

Malfoy was in Romania.

Astoria grabbed Hermione by the chin once again.

"Open your eyes wide, Mudblood," Astoria commanded.

Hermione could feel herself start shaking as her eyes widened.

"Please...don't!"

"Shut up," Astoria said coldly as she pulled Hermione's face closer. Astoria pressed the tip of her wand against the outer corner of Hermione's left eye; digging the tip back into the socket. She sneered into Hermione's face. "I hope I'm there when Draco sees you next. Even if he kills me, the satisfaction will be well worth it." Hermione tried to tear her face away and Astoria withdrew her wand momentarily to immobilise Hermione with a quick hex, freezing Hermione in place before stabbing her wand roughly into the side of Hermione's eye again.

The pain in Hermione's eye was increasing, she could feel that her eyeball was on the verge of being pulled from her socket. Her whole body was shaking and she couldn't move.

The sound of her panicked breathing cut through the surreal realisation that Astoria Malfoy's face might be the last thing she ever saw. She heard her own strangled scream as she felt something in her eye give and her vision become one sided.

Suddenly there was a cracking sound in the distance so abrupt that the Manor trembled. Astoria jerked with surprise but didn't stop.

"Expelliarmus!" Malfoy snarled as he appeared from thin air.

The wand digging into Hermione's eye vanished and Astoria was flung across the room and struck the wall with a sickening crunch before falling to the floor.

Hermione remained frozen in place with open eyes, sobbing hysterically and immobilised where Astoria had left her.

Malfoy swept in front of Hermione, countering the immobilisation hex. Hermione dropped to the floor. Malfoy knelt down in front of her and tilted her face up toward his. His face was pale, frozen and his expression grew horrified when he saw her face. He cast a diagnostic spell on her. After a minute he swallowed and took several deep breaths as though he were trying to steady himself.

"You eye is half pulled out of the socket and you have a deep puncture in the white," he said at last. "What are the spells to fix it?"

Hermione stared at him dazedly. Crying. Her face was twisted as she shook against his hand and felt

her tears collecting against his fingers. She could see him through one eye but there was just a dark blur on her left side.

She couldn't stop crying and shuddering as she stared up at Malfoy.

She knew she should know the answer to his question but she couldn't remember. She could just feel the spot where Astoria's wand had punctured her eye.

She couldn't see...

Malfoy inhaled sharply and his expression hardened as he stared at her more intently.

"I need you to calm down so you can tell me how to fix it," Malfoy said. The command was heavy in his tone.

Hermione choked down a sob and tried to breathe. She wanted to close her eyes but she couldn't, because Astoria had tried to pull one of them out. She gasped raggedly several times trying to compose herself. Then she made herself look down at the diagnostic reading still visible on Malfoy's wand.

She was a healer. Someone had an injured eye. She needed to work efficiently if she wanted to try to preserve their sight.

"For a punctured sclera," she said in a wobbling voice, casting her mind back trying to recall as she analyzed the reading. Malfoy had performed a detailed diagnostic on her and she could see that the damage was extensive. "*Sclera Sanentur*. You have to say it rhythmically, almost singing it. And trace the tip of your wand over the puncture."

Malfoy repeated the inflection and rhythm and she gave a short nod. He proceeded to perform it on her eye. She whimpered quietly as she felt it puncture begin to repair itself.

"And then—for a—a luxated left eye," she said in a voice that was calmer than she felt. "It's *oculus sinister retreho*. And the wand movement— "

She cautiously, half-blindly reached toward Malfoy's left hand and, when he didn't jerk away from her, she closed her fingers over his and demonstrated the delicate spiraling motion.

"Don't do it too quickly or you'll over retract," she added.

Malfoy nodded.

Hermione felt her eye slide back into place in her head. The dark blur was slightly brighter but it still was like staring through a heavily fogged window.

Malfoy cast a new diagnostic.

"H-how much can you see?" he asked tilting her face up toward his again, his fingertips pressing lightly along her jaw.

She looked up at him and covered her right eye with her hand. His face was only a few inches away from hers.

"You're blond. I think—I can tell that you're blond and if I try I can make out your eyes and mouth a little—" Her voice cut off in a whimper and she choked as she started crying again. Her hand slid

away from her right eye and she clamped it over her mouth as she fought not to sob.

"What else do I need to do? How do I fix it?" he asked.

"Dittany," she said. "Essence of Dittany, might be able to repair the rest of the damage. But it's rare. It might be hard to obtain—in time."

"Topsy!"

The elf instantly appeared.

"Bring me Essence of Dittany." The house-elf vanished again.

Malfoy's hands remained on her face until her sobs eased again and then he slowly drew them away.

"Wait here. I need to deal with Astoria now," Malfoy said.

Hermione nodded and wiped her face, finding that she was crying blood. She watched as Malfoy strode over, levitated his wife up off the floor and dropped her into the chair before performing a diagnostic charm on her. The imbalance in Hermione's vision made it hard to see when she tried to see the reading across the room. She thought Astoria had several cracked ribs and a concussion.

Malfoy healed the fractures with practiced ease and then stared down at Astoria for several minutes before finally rennervating her.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to LightOfEvolution for consulting and advising me about the Latin for healing spells.

Chapter 20

"Draco, how are you here?" Astoria gasped as soon as she regained consciousness. She reached over and touched her side gingerly as she shrank back in the chair.

"I had to apparate across Europe because of you," he said in a low snarl.

The rage in his voice was palpable.

Hermione stared. Cross-continental apparition was—almost impossible. It required either jumping so many times that a person exhausted their magic and had to stop, or such a tremendous amount of concentration that it was practically impossible to survive. Most people who jumped more than a few countries splinched themselves to death. If Malfoy had actually apparated so far, he should be nearly dead from magical exhaustion.

In that case, it was no wonder the manor had shaken. The power and concentration to successfully perform such a jump would explode like a shockwave from a sonic boom. There was probably a room in the manor that had been reduced to splinters.

"That—that's completely impossible," Astoria stuttered.

"Underestimating your husband, Tori?" he said in a coolly murderous tone. "Not very wifely of you."

"Oh, are you here because of me?" Astoria's voice was vicious. "No. You aren't. You're here because of that Mudblood. You hexed me. You threw me into a wall. You *murdered* Graham Montague all because of that Mudblood."

"Yes, I did," Malfoy said. "I did all of those things because she is the last member of the Order of the Phoenix, and that means she, unlike you, is important; infinitely more important than you are. Considerably more important than Montague. Did you know that the Dark Lord has her brought before him regularly to inspect her memories? The eyes are rather useful when performing legilimency."

Astoria paled and Malfoy continued speaking in his cold, deadly voice, "I have tried to be patient with you, Astoria. I've been willing to overlook your indecent behavior and petty interferences, but do recall that aside from being somewhat decorative, you are useless to me. If you ever go near her again, or speak to her, or use your status as the lady of this manor to break through any of my wards, I will kill you. And I will do it slowly; perhaps over the course of an evening or two. That isn't a threat. It is a promise. Get. Out. Of. My. Sight."

Astoria gave a terrified sob and fled the room.

Malfoy stood breathing deeply for several seconds before he turned back to Hermione. He approached her slowly, then knelt and tilted her face up to look at her eyes again.

"The pupils are different sizes," he said after a moment. "After I've applied the Essence of Dittany, I'll send for a specialist to come and see if there's anything else to be done."

Hermione stared at him. "You don't need my eyes to perform legilimency," she said in a wooden

voice. "It's just easier that way. It won't matter if I'm blind in one eye."

She felt the fingers on her face flinch faintly and his jaw clenched.

"I consider it a matter of convenience," he said after a beat.

His thumb ghosted lightly across her cheekbone as he continued to study her.

She stared back at him. He looked haggard but maybe it only seemed that way because of how her vision blurred.

"How did you apparate from Romania?" she asked.

He gave a tired smirk. "The ability came compliments of the Dark Lord. Although—I don't believe he had any idea at the time. It was intended as a punishment."

Hermione furrowed her eyebrows. She had no idea what kind of punishment could possibly have the side-effect of enabling cross-continental apparition. Some kind of horribly obscure Dark magic.

"What kind of curse—?"

"It wasn't a curse, it was a ritual, and not one I feel like discussing," he said, cutting her off abruptly.

"How did you know I'd know the spells?" she said when he kept staring at her.

"You were a healer." He shrugged. "If I'd apparated you to St Mungo's, I assumed the pressure would have wrecked your eye. Time was essential."

"Where did you learn to heal?" she asked, thinking back on all the spells and diagnostics he'd known immediately.

A smirk pulled at the corner of his mouth.

"I was a General for years, I picked things up along the way. It was an obvious skill to develop."

"Not to everyone." Hermione had tried on many occasions to teach the members of the Order more than basic emergency healing spells but most of them had been reluctant to learn much beyond episkey. "Yes. Well, I was on the winning side, we obviously made better strategic choices," he said in a cold voice as he withdrew his hands.

"It was an unusual diagnostic spell you knew," Hermione said, ignoring his comment.

"It was a long war." He was still kneeling in front of her.

Hermione looked down at her lap for a minute, then looked back up at him. There was a headache beginning to develop in her temples from her imbalanced vision.

"You—have a natural talent for healing. In another life, you could have been a healer," she said.

"One of life's great ironies," he said glancing away from her. She thought the corner of his mouth twitched faintly, but perhaps it was just a trick of her vision.

"I suppose it is." Hermione looked down at her hands again. Her fingertips were stained with blood. So were his. There was a crack, Topsy appeared with a small vial of Essence of Dittany which she handed to Malfoy.

"Get the door repaired," Malfoy ordered the elf, barely glancing at it as he turned back to Hermione.

Hermione started pushing herself unsteadily to her feet.

"I should—I should lay down, so it doesn't run," she said. Her balance felt off and her hands and arms shook and wouldn't bear her weight. She sank back onto the floor and bit her lip in frustration; maybe she'd just lie on the ground.

A hand closed around her elbow and drew her to her feet.

"I'm not leaning over you on the floor," Malfoy said in a cold voice as he pulled her across the room and then backed her into her bed. "Lie down here."

She felt behind herself and slid onto the bed. She pushed the pillow to the side and lay down flat.

Malfoy leaned over her, vial in hand. His face went in and out of focus every time she blinked. Dark. Light. Dark. Light.

"How many drops?" he asked.

Hermione hesitated. Essence of Dittany was expensive. When she'd been a healer she'd had to ration it; carefully weigh the benefit against the cost.

"A drop every two hours for the next several days is ideal. But, one dose of three drops will do," she finally said. "Will do what?" he said.

"I'll probably be able to make out outlines and detect colour within a few feet," she said.

Malfoy leaned forward and used his right hand to lightly hold her left eye open while he dripped one drop of the Essence into her eye. It stung. Hermione immediately closed her eyes to refrain from blinking it away.

The hand on her face vanished.

"I'll be back in two hours. And I'll ensure Astoria stays away."

She heard his receding footsteps and raised her hand up to hold her left eye closed so she could watch him go.

He stumbled slightly when he was near the door, as though he were unsteady on his feet.

Hermione closed her eyes again and lay still, willing herself not to cry.

Don't cry. Don't cry, she told herself. It would waste the Dittany.

Malfoy reappeared two hours later with a specialist; an elderly man dressed in lime green robes. The healer's expression was drawn but he seemed determined to hide his discomfort. He barely glanced at Hermione.

"Sclera punctures are quite a nasty business," the healer said in a wheezing voice as he conjured a chair beside the bed and looked back towards Malfoy. "Not always much that can be done. Basic healing charms aren't much for preserving sight. We'll have to see what there is to work with. She was the one who told you which spells to use?"

Malfoy gave a short nod and leaned against the wall.

The healer turned toward Hermione and cast an unfamiliar ocular diagnostic charm.

Hermione stared at ribbons on colour floating over her head and but didn't know how to read them. The healer was silent for several minutes as he manipulated the diagnostic.

"This—is quite exceptional repair work," the healer said in a tone of surprise after giving the ribbon a final prod with the tip of his wand and sending little sparks of light into it. The ribbons flickered and twisted in response.

"What spell did you have him use?" the healer asked, finally looking down at Hermione's face.

"Sclera Sanentur," she said.

His eyebrows jumped. "You probably would have lost your sight if you'd gone with more common spells. Where did you learn this kind of healing?" he asked in an astonished voice. "Austria, France, Albania, and Denmark," Hermione said, her voice subdued. "I moved around. My specialty was healing the dark arts and casualty injuries."

"Really?" The dismissive quality in the healer's behavior toward Hermione faded and he studied her thoughtfully. "I applied to study in Albania. Back in '64. Couldn't get in, my wandwork wasn't precise enough. Beautiful hospital. Their Old Magicks Department was Europe's finest."

"It was," Hermione said, her voice wistful.

"Pity how the terrorists destroyed it during the war," the healer said. "Then again," he eyed Hermione's clothing and wrists and his lip curled, "I suppose you were one of them."

"Not one who ever attacked a hospital," Hermione said.

It had been a favoured tactic of Voldemort's; attack places that should have been neutral and frame the Resistance terrorists for it. It had helped ally the public with Voldemort, and driven the Resistance further underground.

Hermione remembered when they'd gotten word the Albanian hospital had been blown up. There'd been almost no survivors; all the healers who had mentored Hermione had died in the rubble.

The Resistance in Albania had disappeared soon after.

The specialist continued to study the diagnostic reading over Hermione for several more minutes before he made it vanish with a flick of his wand. He cast a few charms that Hermione felt sink in and it grew strangely cold feeling toward the front of her brain. Then the healer leaned forward and added a drop of Essence of Dittany to her eye.

"I think you may actually make a full recovery. Keep the lights low and apply Essence of Dittany every two hours during the day and an extra drop just before you go to sleep for the next two weeks. Do that, and I think there may end up being little to no long term impairment in your vision."

Hermione watched one-eyed as he stood and turned toward Malfoy, straightening his robes pompously. "I must say, that's an exceptional little healer you've got there. When you told me what happened I was expecting she'd end up mostly blind in the eye. Sanentur spells are quite obscure and injury-specific. It's remarkable she had the presence of mind to distinguish that it would be appropriate for repairing that particular type of puncture."

"Quite fortunate," Malfoy said, his tone bland. "Is there anything else you recommend? I'm under strict orders to keep her in good condition. I don't want anything overlooked."

"Well—perhaps a cool compress. Essence of Dittany works best in the eyes when kept at a cool temperature. And—ah—um. Nourishing food. Chicken broths and the like. To help the body heal. She probably knows." "Very well," Malfoy said, straightening and indicating toward the door of Hermione's room which the house-elves had repaired.

The healer looked down at Hermione again.

"Quite exceptional," he said again in a wondering voice. "Pity. Such a waste of talent."

"Hmm," Malfoy said noncommittally.

"And you, sir. Quite remarkable you could perform the spells so well. Very impressive collaboration. You could be a healer yourself."

"So I keep being told," Malfoy said with an insincere smile. "Do you think St Mungo's will still hire me after I murdered someone in their waiting room?"

The healer blanched. "Well—What I mean is—"

"If there's nothing else, I'll see you out," Malfoy cut him off and strode from the room.

Hermione spent most of the next several days in bed. A House-elf arrived every two hours with a vial of Essence of Dittany, watched her as she applied a drop to her eye, and then popped away again.

After four days, her vision within an arm's length was mostly recovered but, beyond that radius, things became blurry and it hurt to try to focus.

Malfoy did not appear again but Hermione thought she heard his footsteps in the hallway.

Then Healer Stroud came.

"You've had a rather unfortunate month, I hear," Stroud said, conjuring a medical table and waiting for Hermione to approach

Hermione said nothing as she went over and seated herself on the edge of it. Stroud pulled a vial of veritaserum out and Hermione opened her mouth and accepted the drop on her tongue.

Stroud cast a general diagnostic on Hermione and they both studied it. Hermione's eye was doing better. Her sodium levels were normal. Her cortisol levels were extremely high.

They were always high, but there was a marked spike in them.

Stroud sighed and wrote something in Hermione's file before casting a pregnancy detection charm.

Hermione already knew what the result of the charm would be. She stared pointedly at the clock on the wall. Her imbalanced vision meant she couldn't make out the numbers anymore or even the hands unless she closed her left eye.

There was a long silence. So long that Hermione finally looked back and found Healer Stroud had cast a more detailed diagnostic of Hermione's reproductive system. Hermione couldn't make out all

the readings clearly but she recognised enough to know that there was nothing unusual in it. She glanced up at Healer Stroud's face.

It was blurred but Hermione could still make out the familiar tensed irritation around the woman's mouth as she manipulated the diagnostic with her wand.

"You're still not pregnant," Stroud said flatly.

The words were both an accusation and a condemnation.

Hermione didn't flinch or even blink. Healer Stroud continued, "You're one of the only ones still not pregnant. And in the case of the others, it is because the—sires have issues of their own."

There was a pause. Healer Stroud seemed to be awaiting a defense.

"Perhaps the High Reeve has issues too," Hermione finally said.

"He does not. I examined him myself, several times now. He is perfectly virile and fertile. Exceptional even."

Hermione fought against letting her mouth twitch with amusement at the thought of Malfoy being examined by Stroud. He must love that, she thought to herself.

Outwardly Hermione was silent. Healer Stroud sighed sharply.

"How does he take you? Do you stay reclined after as instructed? Are you washing afterwards?"

The questions were suspicious.

Hermione felt her cheeks flush as she was compelled to answer the questions.

"There's a clock there on the wall. I always wait for the allotted time before moving. I follow all the washing instructions. The portrait can verify it."

Healer Stroud's eyes were narrowed.

"And how does he take you?"

Hermione stared intently at the blurry clock until her head began to throb.

"On a table."

"What?" Healer Stroud said sharply.

"He—he conjures a table, in the middle of the room. And has me lean over it."

"He takes you from behind?"

Hermione felt her cheeks and ears growing hot. "Yes. He's very—clinical about it." "How many times a day?" "Once a day. For five days."

There was a long silence.

"Well—" Healer Stroud finally said. Then she leaned over and tapped her wand twice on one of the manacles on Hermione's wrists. There was an immediate flush of heat.

A minute later, there was a sharp rap on the door and Malfoy walked in, looking as cold as Hermione had ever seen him. She could just barely make out his face as he walked toward Healer Stroud. She closed her left eye in order to try to see more clearly.

"You called," he said.

"She's still not pregnant," Healer Stroud announced.

Malfoy looked neither surprised nor disappointed by the announcement.

"How unfortunate," he said coolly.

"Indeed. It's beginning to become anomalous. There is nothing I can find to account for it."

Healer Stroud's eyes were narrowed as she stared at Malfoy.

Hermione's curiosity was suddenly piqued. Did Healer Stroud suspect Malfoy was trying to avoid impregnating Hermione? Was he? Why would he? He should have been desperate to get her pregnant. If not for an heir, at least in the hopes that the compatible magic would finally corrode and break through the magic protecting Hermione's memories.

"The Dark Lord may have reason for concern if she continues to be unfruitful. As you know, his desire for it is dual in nature."

"Indeed. I am aware." Malfoy said, a dangerous edge entering his voice.

"Then you should have no objections if I make some recommendations as to how to increase your odds of success."

Malfoy inclined his head. "Anything in the service of the Dark Lord."

"No more tables then," said Stroud in a pointed tone.

There was a flicker of something, possibly irritation in Malfoy's eyes.

"Fine.

"And have her in a reclined position," Stroud said, raising her chin, "with less detachment."

A sneer curled onto Malfoy's lips, but before he said anything Stroud added, "Magical pregnancy is more complex than merely the biological process of fertilisation. It can require a connection. Otherwise, we could be utilising muggle methods for this repopulation effort with far greater convenience for everyone."

"Really? Do all the other pregnant breeders you have attribute their conditions to the connection they have with the sires?" Malfoy drawled.

"She is exceptional in her magic, as are you," Stroud said, her expression stiff. "According to some theories, such power causes the spark of life to require more—persuasion. Unless there's some other explanation you can offer."

She gave Malfoy a long look which he returned without blinking.

Hermione was certain, Stroud did suspect Malfoy of doing something to interfere.

"Fine."

"Excellent," Stroud said, her mouth widening into a thin smile. "After all, the Dark Lord is quite eager for access to be gained to those memories. If the conception efforts continue to fail, we may find ourselves obliged to consider other 'sires.'"

"I was under the impression that using magical pregnancy to unlock the memories necessitated that the father be the legilimens or it may result in a miscarriage," Malfoy said in a lightly cutting tone.

"That's true. The magi-genetic familiarity is important. However, it wouldn't necessarily need to be a paternal familiarity. Half-siblings, for example, could be another option. I have heard rumours that your father may be recalled to Britain."

Hermione felt herself wobble and her throat contracted as though she were going to be sick. Malfoy's expression didn't flicker but he paled, visibly, even in Hermione's blurred vision.

Healer Stroud continued and there was a taunting quality to her voice. "I haven't mentioned the option to the Dark Lord. Yet. But I know how eager he is for progress. It would a disappointment for me to have to recommend it. As a scientist, I must admit I'm particularly curious to see the progeny from two such uniquely powerful individuals. But... my first loyalty is to the Dark Lord, so if this particular pairing is still unfruitful after six months I feel I'll have no option but to offer an alternative solution."

"Of course," Malfoy said, his tone calm but with an edge to it that Hermione recognised as cold fury. "Was there anything else?"

"Nothing else, High Reeve. Thank you for your time," Healer Stroud said.

Malfoy turned on his heel and vanished through the doorway.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: A gentle reminder that depiction is not authorial endorsement. Third person limited point of view necessarily involves some distortions of vision and missed/misconstrued events.

Hermione remained seated on the exam table in a state of horror. The grating, scratching sound of Healer Stroud's quill in Hermione's file continued along with the endless, monotonous ticking of the clock.

Hermione's mouth felt parched and she struggled to swallow; there was a sour taste in her mouth. She tried to breathe evenly but found that her throat had closed, and she could do nothing but sit rigidly and try not to pass out at the thought of getting handed over to Lucius Malfoy.

Lucius Malfoy who was insane; far more insane than Bellatrix Lestrange had been. Who always broke the rules and crossed lines and somehow managed to use his silver tongue to save his skin. Who could have killed Arthur Weasley, but instead chose to curse him in such a way as to steal the Weasley patriarch's mind and leave his body intact for his family to care and mourn over; a helpless, childish shadow of a wonderful, generous father. Who cursed George with a horrific variation of the necrosis curse that it had forced Hermione to cut off his leg at the hip while he was still conscious in order to save him. Who killed Ron before Hermione's eyes, laughing the entire time.

Hermione thought she might faint or just snap and start screaming. Her head was pounding and the room was swimming slightly.

She started shaking.

"What's wrong?" Healer Stroud asked.

Hermione flinched.

"You—just threatened to hand me over to Lucius Malfoy."

"I'm hopeful it won't come to that," Healer Stroud said in a bland voice.

"And if it does?"

"Well, we can have it supervised, if there is too much concern that Lucius will overstep himself. It's unfortunate I can't redose you with the fertility potion this month. I'll have some potions sent that should at least ease things and possibly improve your odds of success."

Hermione fell silent and didn't speak again. She felt so ill with stress she wondered if she might be poisoning herself.

Malfoy arrived late in the evening and she stared at him listlessly. His expression was hard; set jaw and cold, flinty eyes, but also tired. He was probably back to hunting down the last member of the Order. Or perhaps he was worried that his father was going to kill her prematurely.

She studied him, trying to divine from his expression why on earth he would have done anything to intentionally not get her pregnant. Hermione couldn't think of an explanation for it. She kept turning

it over in her mind but couldn't come up with anything that seemed plausible.

She reviewed the possibilities.

It could be because he found the idea of her being the biological mother of his heir so objectionable, but Hermione doubted that was the issue. For one thing, aside from using Mudblood as though it were her given name, he didn't seem to care much about blood purity. He didn't treat Voldemort's victory like it was a testament to pureblood superiority nor did he treat Hermione's imprisonment as being due to her dirty blood. Whenever he spoke of the war, he referred to the sides as being set apart primarily by idealism vs realism.

In Hermione's experience, bigots were obsessive with their bigotry. Draco Malfoy at Hogwarts had been a little parrot of his father's bigotry. The Draco Malfoy of the present— Hermione wasn't sure what he was obsessed with.

Hermione, if Astoria were to be believed.

Hermione didn't know what to believe.

He always had such a smooth answer and a compelling excuse for all his behaviour.

Why wouldn't he want her pregnant? She couldn't imagine where that fit strategically.

She hadn't wanted to be pregnant, but now knowing what lengths Healer Stroud and Voldemort might go to in order to ensure it...

She still felt utterly nauseated at the thought of having Malfoy 'take' her on a bed 'with less detachment;' of getting pregnant; of not getting pregnant and then getting handed over to Lucius...

No good options; just worse and worse until she thought she was going to finally just have a mental breakdown.

She couldn't stop thinking about it, and every time she reviewed the options again she felt as though she were going to be violently ill.

Malfoy cast a diagnostic charm on her eyes and studied it. "How much can you see now?" he asked.

Hermione laughed abruptly.

She had no idea when she'd last laughed. Years before, most likely. But the question was funny. Hilarious even.

Everything in her life was a complete and utter horror, and somehow Malfoy's first concern was her eyesight. He kept her prisoner in his house, raped her on command, and he was concerned about her vision.

She couldn't stop laughing. It kept going on and on and growing increasingly hysterical sounding and then she wasn't laughing she was actually crying. She was crying and crying and crying, while she rocked on the edge of her bed, and Malfoy just stood there the whole time; staring at her, expressionless.

It took her twenty minutes before she finally stopped sobbing. Then she just sat there, hiccoughing and holding her hands over her eyes as she tried breathe. She felt as though she were hollow inside;

as though she had sobbed out everything inside of her and all that was left was a shell.

Finally she was quiet but for an occasional hitching of her breath as she stared at the floor and wished she'd just die.

"Feel better?"

The corner of her mouth twitched and she shrugged tiredly.

"As close to better as I ever will," she said. She stared at his hands and noticed his fingers twitch subtly. She glanced up at him.

"What were you tortured for this time?" she asked.

He smirked as he slid his wand up into his right sleeve. "Clearly you haven't been following the news lately. The public, through their vast collective intelligence, has somehow concluded that I am the High Reeve, even without the confirmation of the Daily Prophet."

The news piqued her curiosity. "Because of Montague?"

He shrugged. "It may have been related, but I suspect it had more to do with my appearance in Romania coinciding with the High Reeve's visit. The press in some of the other European countries is considerably less controlled than Britain's. Once one paper starts saying it, it doesn't take long to spread. I am now publicly acknowledged as the Dark Lord's protege. The previous anonymity was for my protection, of course."

"Of course," Hermione said. "But you were punished for it."

"Other people are dead," he said, eyes cold, "I was merely chastised."

"So just two minutes of the cruciatus then?" Hermione said in a biting tone. "Five."

Hermione felt herself pale with horror as she stared up at him. He gave a thin smile.

"Don't worry yourself on my account, my conscientious little healer. It was days ago. I live on."

There was a pause.

"Why did you kill Montague?" she asked. She had been lying in bed for days, and wondering about it. If he was going to kill Montague, why not have done it immediately? Why publicly?

Malfoy smirked. "I was wondering when you'd finally ask that question. I would have thought it was obvious. He blatantly and intentionally interfered and endangered my assignment, despite being repeatedly warned that you were not to be tampered with in any way. I would have done it more formally, but with my trip I was unfortunately short on time."

"So you killed him in the middle of St Mungos?" she said, eying him doubtfully.

"Well, I was going to kill him in his hospital room, but he tried to run. I improvised." Malfoy's expression was indifferent. "Now, if you're quite done barraging me with questions I believe we have a legilimency session scheduled."

He didn't go through her eyes. Hermione wasn't sure if there was any healing literature about using legilimency following an eye injury, but Malfoy apparently had decided not to risk it and just drove

through her skull.

It hurt a bit more than it usually did, but once he had forced his way through, the pain eased somewhat. Hermione wished there were some way of dissociating while he sifted through her mind, but legilimency dragged the victim through the mind alongside the legilimens. Wherever Malfoy went inside her mind, so did Hermione.

She had no newly unlocked memories, only fresher repetitions of the old ones; especially Ginny crying. It felt like she dreamt of it every night. Always the same memory. It always stopped at the same point.

He seemed to almost hesitate before delving with her recent memories. Of Montague. Of Astoria. Of Stroud's questions before and after his arrival.

By the time he jerked his consciousness out of Hermione's mind, she felt as though she had collapsed inward upon herself. Reliving it all was traumatic enough to make her jaw clench until she felt as though her teeth might crack with trying to keep from shattering internally.

She rolled over onto her side and curled into a tight ball.

Malfoy sighed, the sound barely audible, but didn't say a word. He lingered for a few moments longer before she heard him leave.

She lay in bed trying not to think; wishing she could just turn her mind off. Dread swallowed her like a shroud; like the chill of a ghost, it hung inescapably around her.

She couldn't shake it. She barely bothered to try.

The day after Stroud's visit she left her room for the first time since the equinox. She kept to the North Wing, wandering aimlessly. Silent. Drifting from room to room. Window to window.

As her eye continued to recover, she could see clearly enough to discover that spring had finally begun to creep over the estate. The cold, grey English countryside was beginning to show the faintest glimmers of fresh green, peeking from the tips of tree branches and sliding cautiously out from the dark soil.

Watching spring unfold itself slowly almost felt like hope.

Except—the place inside Hermione where hope had once lived now felt like a hole. As though someone had reached in and cut away something from the core of her being. Where hope had once bloomed there was now nothing but something painful and rotting.

But still—spring was beautiful to see.

It felt surprising to find that there were still beautiful, untainted things in the world. Contrary.

Not rationally. Rationally, Hermione knew that Voldemort's rule didn't blot out the stars in the night sky, nor destroy the Fibonacci sequence, nor defile the first crocuses of spring. But somehow, it surprised her that she could still see that beauty.

Somehow she had thought that the ugly coldness of her life indicated that ugly coldness and cruel beauty were the only things left within her reach or sight. As she looked outside at the estate as it began to adorn itself with new life, it made something inside Hermione shrivel.

If she had a child.... it would be beautiful. Untainted. Pale, and smooth, and pink. With trusting eyes that would only know to expect goodness. With hands that would reach for anyone who reached out toward it. A baby would be beautiful. Pure as spring. Sweet as summer.

And then it would be taken away. Hermione would die, and her baby would be left behind; trained and hurt and twisted up inside until it was a cold, cruel, monster like Malfoy, and Astoria, and all the Death Eaters.

Hermione tore herself from the window she was standing in front of, and hurried toward the inner rooms of the North Wing. Rooms without windows. She didn't want to think about spring, or life, or children, or beauty, or goodness.

She didn't want to think about beautiful things that had been, but were now destroyed. Or the beauty that still remained. It cast the horror into harsher relief until it made it physically painful to think—to breathe—to live. If only a person could die just by wishing it fervently enough.

She couldn't eat. She could barely choke any water down. When a set of five potions arrived with a note from Healer Stroud she shoved them into a cabinet in the bathroom.

The dread twisted itself tighter around her heart, day after day; knowing her next fertile period was drawing closer and closer.

Malfoy walked unexpectedly into her room, and she nearly burst into tears.

He looked tense enough to shatter as he stared at her.

She shot to her feet as though electrocuted and then froze.

There was a pause, and Malfoy looked more uncomfortable than she had ever seen him.

"I thought sending word ahead of time might just make it worse," Malfoy said, watching her carefully.

"I—haven't prepared," she muttered, looking away from him.

"You shower every morning. I don't require you to be excessively washed." His voice was as sharp as the edge of a knife.

The portrait apparently still kept him appraised of everything she did.

Hermione kept standing and staring at him. It felt like the first night when she'd been in his room; trying not to tremble, wondering if she was supposed to just go over and lie down on her bed.

Would he want her near the foot or in the centre of it?

"Take this," he said, pulling a vial of something from his robes and holding it towards her.

She accepted it, and looked at the consistency and colour before removing the cork. A calming draught.

He watched her swallow it. She felt the potion take effect as her jaw and shoulders loosened, and the twisting tension at the base of her skull relaxed somewhat. The knot in her stomach that had twisted itself tighter and tighter for the last twelve days finally eased slightly.

While Hermione was taking the Calming Draught, Malfoy reached into his robe again and pulled out a second potion. She was surprised to see him take it himself.

It did not appear to be a second vial of Draught of Peace. If anything Malfoy seemed more tense and angry after taking it. A libido potion? It hadn't even occurred to Hermione that he was taking anything. Had he always been? Aside from the very first night, she never looked at him on those nights. Even then, he could have taken something when her back was to him.

Why would he need one? Stroud had described him as perfectly virile. Exceptional.

Rape really wasn't his thing.

"Do—? Do I—? Should I be in the centre or on the edge of the bed?" Hermione forced herself to ask.

He stared at her.

"Centre," he finally said in a clipped voice. "Given that I'm ordered to be less detached."

Hermione turned toward her bed.

Her bed.

Where she slept every night.

The only place with any sense of solace or safety that she had left.

Her bed.

Where she was about to—to be? Was it rape if she'd rather it be him than his father?

She bit her lip and swallowed hard as she walked over to it and tried not to start crying.

She sat on the edge and then slid herself toward the approximate centre of it before forcing herself to lay back. Malfoy approached a moment later.

He'd removed the outer parts of his robes, just wearing a shirt and trousers.

She tensed as soon as he got close, trying not to grind her teeth as she felt her jaw lock. She fought not to hyperventilate as he got close to her, and she watched him with widening, terrified eyes.

Her appearance seemed to set him off.

"Just shut your eyes," he hissed. "I'm not going to hurt you."

She forced herself to close her eyes, and tried to focus on regulating her breathing as she felt the bed shift. She could smell him; the biting scent of the forest floor suddenly struck her as she tried not to hyperventilate.

There was a pause, and then she felt him slide her robes aside and move in between her legs. Between her legs. Like Montague.

The sharp, cold little rocks. She sobbed through her teeth and flinched. Her body was so tense she was shaking. She could feel her nails steadily cutting into the flesh of her palms as she fisted them tighter and tighter.

"I'm not going to hurt you." Malfoy breathed the words near her left ear.

She gave a tiny nod of acknowledgment. Better than Lucius. God—she couldn't even think about it. She jerked and fought back another sob. Trying to relax marginally.

"Just—breathe," he said.

She heard him mutter a lubrication charm the moment before he slid into her.

She tried to focus on breathing. To force herself to dwell on the feeling of her rib cage expanding and contracting. Or her nails in her palms.

She could feel Malfoy's breath on her face. She smelled cedarwood oil in his clothing. The weight of his body pressed down against her. The length of him inside her.

She didn't want to feel any of it. She couldn't not feel it. He was everywhere. Surrounding her. The sensation of him in her and his weight on her was inescapably real. She couldn't detach the way she'd learned to do on the table.

She wanted to beg him to stop.

Better than Lucius. Better than Lucius.

She just wanted it to stop.

She didn't mean to, but she became aware that there were tears sliding down from the corners of her eyes as she struggled not to sob under him.

Finally he seized and came with a hiss.

The instant he did he ripped himself away from her and the bed.

Hermione opened her eyes and tried to steady her breathing. As she lay on the bed, she became aware of the sound of retching emerging from the bathroom.

As she laid there, she heard the toilet flush, and then the sound of water running from the faucet for several minutes.

She tried to compose herself, and not think about the fact she couldn't move. Not think about the physical experience of what had just happened.

He had been as considerate as he possibly could have been.

It was bizarre. He was a cold, indifferent, murderous person who could casually disembowel people, but rape crossed a line. Did he always throw up afterward? Or was having to look at her making it worse?

Maybe something had happened to someone he knew. Someone he had cared about. Maybe it was related to his abilities with the killing curse. He re-emerged from the bathroom. His tense expression seemed faded as though he couldn't quite maintain it. He was pale and exhausted, and more traumatised looking than she had ever seen him.

He'd never stayed after the fact before. He always left before she even saw him. Maybe he always looked that way afterwards.

He seemed—concerned about her. Not that he actually asked, but he was studying her carefully from across the room.

"I'm sorry," she found herself saying. She blinked.

Why was she apologising to Malfoy? It was as if the words had slipped out of their own volition. He stared at her with surprise. She tried to clarify.

"For crying. You were—" She had no idea how to describe him. Not the worst rapist?

"It all—just—It reminded me of Montague," she finally said, glancing away.

"Hopefully it will be easier tomorrow," he said in a hard voice. Then he summoned his robes, and stalked from the room without another word.

Hermione lay there, watching the hands on the clock slowly journey across its face. When ten minutes had elapsed she still didn't move. Maybe if she waited longer a pregnancy would take, and then she wouldn't have to lie there and endure being—

She wasn't sure what the proper term was for what Malfoy did to her.

While the general concept and situation was categorised as rape, she didn't feel like the term fully captured what had occurred. It wasn't sex, or shagging, or fucking, or screwing, or even "taking." Copulating, was possibly the proper term for before, on the table. But now—it felt too real and connected and miserable for them both to use such a clinical term.

There was no word for it.

She would gladly go without being touched by a man for as long as she lived. She didn't want to think about Malfoy arriving to repeat it all again tomorrow.

The thought of life quickening within her made her sick with horror. The thought of it not—

She could endure Malfoy. She didn't think she could endure Lucius.

She rolled onto her side and fell asleep on top of the covers.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: A gentle reminder that depiction is not authorial endorsement. Third person limited point of view necessarily involves some distortions of vision and missed/misconstrued events.

The next morning, Hermione dragged herself from bed and into the bathroom down the hall with a shower. The hot water beating down and radiating around her was the closest thing to physical comfort that she had access to.

She closed her eyes and stayed there, eventually sinking down onto the floor and hugging her knees as she squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to think about the previous night.

She focused on her shower.

One of the most under-appreciated aspects of magic was the never ending supply of hot water. The temperature never faltered or ran out. It just streamed down upon her. If she stayed there for an entire day the water would still come out hot.

When she finally forced herself to turn off the taps and climb out, she stood in the middle of the steamy bathroom trying of summon the willpower to dry off and dress.

She had never felt so unmotivated. Existing seemed like such a unfair demand.

Hermione would give anything for a book—anything to read but the news. She was sick of the news.

Perhaps she would go for a walk. She hadn't been outside since the equinox. She didn't know if she was ever going to be able to go near the hedges again, but perhaps she could manage a walk along one of the lanes. She could inspect the buds on the trees. Count daffodils. Something.

She walked out of the bathroom and went down the icy hallway wrapped in a towel. Back in her room she went over to the wardrobe to pull a fresh set of robes out.

Laying them out on the bed she dropped the towel and surveyed herself.

The remaining scars from Montague had all faded entirely. There was a spot on the inside of her right breast that still felt scarred in the tissue. Hermione ran her fingers over it thoughtfully. It had been so deep, it probably should have required a more specific healing charm. The area felt taut.

It had been deep enough that the damaged tissue was not just dermal. Typical healing charms were designed for skin and muscle repair. There was probably a specific spell for repairing mammary tissue, but Hermione couldn't remember it off the top of her head. She closed her eyes, and tried to think back and see if she could remember learning it.

She could remember a large book of healing spells. She'd carried it with her constantly for several years. Shrunk to fit in her pockets, always on hand. Stained with blood and potions that spilled and sank into the pages when she was too busy to charm them away in time. Dog-eared to the most important sections. So many dog-eared pages. Crammed with her notes in the margins. It had been the first thing she bought after Dumbledore died. She remembered the large owl that flew into the

Great Hall of Hogwarts and dropped it for her.

Everyone else had been talking about restarting DA. Buying books on defense magic. But Hermione had turned to healing. It had been the start of the schism, the space that slowly grew between herself and everyone else her age within the Resistance.

While they had been drilling shield charms and stunners, she had gone to Madam Pomfrey and asked for an apprenticeship.

She spent most of her days with Madam Pomfrey, memorising every healing spell and advanced diagnostic charms the school matron could teach. Learning which signs and symptoms to look out for.

Healing spell work was highly precise—subtle. It required the ability to filter out distractions and focus, to channel magic with extremely delicate nuance. Determine the proper spell, perfect the inflection, and then funnel down one's intentions with precision.

Healers didn't use physical scalpels, but magically speaking the mental exactitude and wandwork was comparable.

Hermione had memorised diagram after diagram of human anatomy. Drilling herself on all the details she needed to train her eyes to pick up in a diagnostic; puzzle pieces of information that had to be assembled in order to identify what might be wrong.

Then in the evening she'd head to the dungeons to study potions with Snape.

When she had finished with healing and potions, she would sequester herself into a corner of the library, rifling through book after book in search of useful spellwork for Harry. Until she'd fall asleep there.

Slowly, she had drifted away from her friends.

They were all so righteously angry and yet optimistic following Dumbledore's death. There was a fire of certainty driving them that Hermione couldn't seem to spark within herself even at the very beginning. The more she learned, the more her confidence regarding the outcome of the war seemed to wane. No one else seemed to appreciate how hard it was to keep people alive.

When she failed to share the optimism it offended them. She was Harry's friend, why wouldn't she believe in him? Why was she so determined to make everyone feel scared? Did she think she was smarter than them? She couldn't even cast a patronus anymore. Maybe if she spent more time practicing her defense spells she'd stop being so morbid.

It wasn't that they weren't taking the war seriously, but that their perspective was narrowed. It was Light vs Darkness, Good vs Evil. Light always won. Look at the stories look at the history books. Yes, some people would die, but it would be for the cause; a worthy death. They weren't afraid to die for that.

Eventually Hermione had stopped talking and withdrew with her books. There was no point in noting that history books were written by the victors. Or that there were plenty of wars in the muggle world where lives were just another form of ammunition; where battles failed to mean anything, or produce more than a new list of casualties; a fresh row of graves. Maybe they all needed to believe such things, but Hermione couldn't. She'd needed to prepare. She buried herself in

healing, in potions, in books until the Ministry of Magic fell and the War officially began

Then she'd been rushed off to begin studying in France. Then Albania, when France became too dangerous. Then Denmark. Then—Austria? No.

Had there been somewhere else, before she went to Austria? It felt like there was a gap. A blur. Hermione pushed at the blank space in her memory. Somewhere, somewhere else she'd gone to study. Where could it have been? Why would she forget it? She forced her mind toward the blur and it was just dimness. A low golden light emanating from a lamp, dust, the scent of old paper, dry and green, and the thin chain of a necklace in her hands.

Nothing else. She pressed harder, but the memory faded into the back of her mind again. She couldn't remember anything more.

Just like she couldn't recall the spell for repairing mammary tissue.

She sighed to herself as her fingers fell away from the knotted tissue.

The faultiness of her memory was increasingly unnerving.

Sometimes she wasn't even sure she knew who *she* had been during the war. She remembered herself as a healer. Just a healer and a potion mistress.

At some point she had diverged from that person, and she didn't know how or when it had happened.

When had she become someone that Voldemort would describe as dangerous? A person who leveled half a prison. Who burned dementors, and stabbed Graham Montague with poisoned knives?

Hermione had no idea where that version of herself could have come from. She found it difficult to believe the person had ever existed.

Somehow that mysterious person had been swallowed up in the darkness beneath Hogwarts. Without the second-hand accounts of Voldemort, Malfoy, and Montague, she would never have even known such a person had existed. She almost would think it was some sort of deception if she didn't have so many scars she couldn't account for.

She glanced down at her left wrist, ran her finger tips over the scattered, silvery scars that mottled her sternum and collarbones, and then traced over the long, thin scar between her seventh and eighth ribs.

Healer Stroud had said the fugues in her mind weren't a dissociation or multiple personalities, but Hermione rather felt that they must be. Hermione as she knew herself to be would never have leveled half a prison and killed countless other people in order to break-in. Not even for Ginny. Hermione wouldn't have treated everyone else as collateral damage in a rescue attempt. She didn't know how fill a sky with burning dementors. She had never carried poisoned knives, much less learned how to stab anyone with them.

There was something cavernous in her ignorance, and she didn't know how to reconcile it. She pulled on her robes, went downstairs, and wavered at the veranda door. The air was warm and smelled loamy, with faint traces of sweetness. There were huge beds of daffodils and irises that had seemingly sprung up in previous two weeks. The birds were singing.

It was as though the outside world had transformed itself while Hermione had been lying in her darkened room. Nature had dropped its shroud, and stopped mirroring the coldness and gloom of Hermione's life. The world had left her behind. It had sprung to life again, but Hermione was still trapped in a cage, cold and deathly.

She turned and walked back inside.

She didn't want to feel the stirring of spring; not on her skin or in her blood. She didn't want to think about life stirring. Not around her. Not inside her.

Topsy appeared before dinner.

"You is to get ready now," the House-elf squeaked.

It was hours earlier than Malfoy had ever come before. Hermione had no idea what that could possibly be the reason for the change. Every bit of added unpredictability only made it worse. She went cold with dread.

She went in the bathroom and bathed. As she toweled off with shaking hands, she remembered the potions Healer Stroud had sent. She'd been so nervous the night before, she'd forgotten them. After dressing, she went and pulled one of the vials out of the bathroom cabinet. It wasn't a Draught of Peace; the color and consistency were unfamiliar. She sniffed it. The scent was tangy in her nostrils, slightly citrus and peppery. She put a drop on her fingertip and tasted it. It was warm and mildly sweet on the tongue.

She waited a minute. She felt less cold with anxiety.

She swallowed it, and it was hot sliding down her throat. As it reached her stomach, the heat seemed to bloom outward through her whole body.

Her skin tingled and grew almost achingly sensitive. Hermione froze, gasped with horror and lurched forwards, staring wide-eyed in the mirror. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were dilating as she studied her reflection. She pressed her hands over her mouth and stumbled back.

Stroud had given her a lust potion.

Hermione wanted to burst into tears as she tried to steady herself and will away the effects of the potion currently burning through her.

This couldn't be happening.

It was just boundlessly cruel.

Hermione's hands were shaking as she tried to think of some solution. Some way to neutralise it. She snatched up the cup from beside the sink and gulped glass after glass of water in the hope of flushing it from her system. It didn't work. The heat through her body seemed be dropping lower, beginning to radiate from her lower abdomen.

She walked into her room. She couldn't understand why Stroud would do this. Punishing Malfoy for whatever interference he had made in the breeding program was one thing, but tricking Hermione into dosing herself with a lust potion was a whole new level of callousness.

Hermione climbed unsteadily onto her bed, laid back and closed her eyes. If she just held still and

focused it might be alright.

The click of the door made her flinch.

She opened her eyes and found Malfoy standing there, cold and tense as he unclasped his outer robes and shrugged them off his shoulders. He was studying her as he crossed the room, draped the clothing over the edge of the bed and stared down at her.

"Do you want another Calming Draught?" he said.

It was possible a Calming Draught could help. Hermione calculated, it might ease the physical reaction her body was burning with. She gave a sharp nod and sat up. As she took the vial from his hand, their fingers brushed and she bit her tongue to keep from gasping.

She unstoppered it and gulped it down while Malfoy knocked back his own potion.

The Draught of Peace had a worsening effect. Rather than ease the symptoms it made her body relax further into them. She dropped the vial onto the bed as she tried to hand it back.

She covered her mouth with her hands and burst into tears. Malfoy stared at her for a moment.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

"Healer Stroud sent a set of potions that she said would make things easier," she said, smearing away the tears and staring determinedly down at the covers on the bed. "I forgot about it yesterday, but I took it tonight, just before you arrived. I thought it would be for anxiety. That's what it seemed like when I tested a drop. It's not like I can do spell analysis. So I took it, but—" she choked slightly. "It was an aphrodisiac."

There was a stunned silence.

"You are an idiot," Malfoy finally said. "Do you just swallow anything without asking questions?"

Hermione flinched.

"Last time I asked you to identify a potion sent to me, you forced it down my throat out of sheer spite. Was I supposed to assume it would be different with you this time?"

Malfoy was silent. The rage emanating from him was palpable. Like heat waves around a flame, the air almost seemed to distort around the edges of his body as he stood there, glaring down at her.

"You are an idiot," he said again.

Hermione wanted to curl in on herself like a ball.

The heat in her core was distractingly steady, and her whole body felt too warm and sensitive. She felt hollow inside. She wanted to be touched. No one had touched her in so long...

No. No. No.

She took a deep shuddering breath. "Can't you wait and do it later tonight? I'm sure it will wear off after a few hours."

"I can't. I've suddenly been required in France tonight. That's why I came here early, I won't be back to the manor until late tomorrow," Malfoy said.

Hermione gave a small sob. "Fine." She choked, and forced herself to lay back down onto the bed. "Just—do it."

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to focus on counting backward from a thousand by doubling the subtracted number each time.

Minus one.

Nine hundred and ninety-nine.

Minus two.

Nine hundred and ninety-seven.

Minus four.

Nine hundred and ninety-three.

Minus eight.

Nine hundred and eighty-five.

She felt Malfoy pushing her robes aside and shivered.

Minus sixteen.

Nine hundred seventy-nine.

Minus thirty-two.

Malfoy's fingers near her core abruptly shredded her concentration, and she let out a smothered moan as her eyes snapped open.

Malfoy was looking down at her with wide, horrified eyes.

She stared at him. She had never really seen him as someone sexual before. Despite five months of having him bend her over a table, the sexual aspect of him had never really registered. He was cold and dangerous. Beautiful, but only in the aesthetic, like a marble statue. Not something hot-blooded. Not something she wanted any kind of physical contact from.

She had never, ever wanted to be touched by him in any sort of way.

Now she wanted to feel his lips against hers. To feel his hands on her. The weight of him that she'd been so desperate to escape from the night before—she wanted to feel it; to have him bearing down on her. Pressing into her.

The burn of arousal in her core was mind-numbing. She had never felt the need to have something inside her before, but as she lay there she felt ready to scream if he didn't touch her. She hadn't thought the second night could possibly be worse than the first, but it was a thousand times worse. She forced her eyes shut again so that she'd stop studying his face; stop taking in all the details of him that she'd never cared to take note of before. His hair and sharp cheekbones, the intensity of his eyes, his thin lips and straight white teeth, the precise lines of his jaw, and his pale throat disappearing in the black collar of his shirt.

"Just move," she said, and nearly sobbed with the effort it took not just move herself.

A moment later, she felt him prod and slide into her, and she immediately canted her hips forward to take him deeper.

She buried her face in her hands and tried to tear her mind away while she gasped against her palms and felt ruined.

She was shaking.

All she could think of was how much she wanted him to move. Hard and fast.

Whimpers kept forming in her throat and she couldn't smother them. She held herself so rigidly her entire body shuddered as she tried not to allow any kind of reaction.

The coil of want was drawing up tighter and tighter inside of her. She bit her lips together. She wouldn't give in.

She just needed to hold out. He'd come soon and it would be over. Then she could leave the potion to burn itself out of her system. His thrusts were becoming longer and harsher the way they did as he reached the end. He sped up slightly and she bit down hard on her tongue as she tried to keep hold.

And then—

She broke with a despairing sob.

Her whole body spasmed around him. She could feel herself clenching and seizing as he thrust into her a few more times, and then he shuddered with a tortured groan.

After a moment he jerked away, and she barely opened her eyes in time to see him snatch his robes off the bed and then apparate straight out of the room. She caught a glimpse of his face before he vanished; he looked grey, as though he were going to faint.

She lay there on the bed and cried as her head slowly cleared. Reality, bitter as poison, started slowly bleeding into her as she absorbed what had happened.

She had just had the first orgasm she had any memory of.

She didn't know if she'd been a virgin before she was sent to Malfoy. If she hadn't been, the loss of it was one of the many details that had vanished from her mind. It seemed like an odd thing to have chosen to protect. So most likely she hadn't had sex during the war. Everything felt foreign. Nothing had given her any indication that such things were something her body had been familiar with.

The lust potion had altered things. Permanently, she feared. Awakened her body to a new aspect of these physical invasions that had previously lain dormant.

Hermione lay unmoving for ten minutes.

When the time finally elapsed she got up and went into the bathroom. She pulled out every remaining vial of potion and poured them down the sink before dropping the vials into the bin.

When she looked up the portrait was there, watching her in the mirror. Always watching. Always silent.

Hermione gave her a bitter smile and then slumped to the ground.

The pale young witch stared at Hermione.

Hermione felt cold, as though she were going into shock. She curled up into a tight ball, hugging her knees and trying to breathe.

She was going to go mad.

She was going to go mad.

She couldn't keep holding on. She didn't even know why she was holding on. Why she hadn't just let herself go while she was locked under Hogwarts.

Malfoy Manor was worse.

She buried her face in her hands. She could feel the fluids from herself and Malfoy on her thighs.

She fell asleep on the floor.

Chapter 23

Hermione was standing in the kitchen of Spinner's End. She turned slowly, looking over the surfaces covered with notebooks, prepared ingredients and bubbling potions.

Hermione paused as she noticed one potion shimmering in the corner. She stepped over and watched the spiraling steam rising from the surface. She sniffed it surreptitiously. The spicy, earthy scent of oak moss, smoky undertones of cedar, the bruised scent of oxidizing leaves, and parchment—no. She sniffed again. Papyrus.

She stepped abruptly away and glanced at the other surrounding cauldrons.

"This is quite a variety of love potions you're brewing," she said, looking over to where Severus was stooped over a simmering cauldron.

"A new project for the Dark Lord. He's suddenly developed an interest in trying to weaponise it," Severus said, sneering down at the murky, lumescent liquid he was working over.

Hermione felt her blood run cold. "Is that a possibility?"

Severus shrugged with a faint smile. "I am both skeptical and unmotivated, so most likely not. I believe it was more of a passing notion than anything he has a sincere interest in. I'm drawing up a comprehensive report to present in case he asks about it. And I'm doing it in my home rather than in the lab to ensure no one offers any groundbreaking ideas."

Hermione surveyed the room. There were ten varieties of love potion and a few aphrodisiacs she recognised, as well as an additional fifteen that appeared experimental.

"What would constitute as a weaponised love potion?"

"Something of exceptional power that doesn't require redosage. I believe he images himself using it for interrogations."

"That's—obscene," Hermione finally said.

"Indeed. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, he has other matters he regards as more urgent for Sussex to focus on."

Hermione woke, still lying on the cold floor of the bathroom. She continued to lie there; if there were an upside to her depression it was that it made sleeping easier. It was as though her body had given up. The rage she'd spent months cultivating had melted away and she was left tired and listless, as though her body weighed too much to even carry across the floor.

She could sleep and sleep in a state of despair for most of the day. She pushed herself off the floor, went to her room, and climbed under the covers of her bed; burrowing into them and hugging them around herself.

Even her brain felt tired and listless. As though even thinking took too much out of her.

She glanced over at the clock. It was nearly nine o'clock in the evening. There was a tray with dinner on it beside the chair, but Hermione had no appetite. She wondered why Malfoy was in France;

presumably it was to kill more people.

Would he still be masked, or would he do it openly? She wondered what he looked like when he cast the killing curse. Most people's faces screwed up in a revolting grimace when they cast the Killing Curse. Even Voldemort. But Malfoy's hatred and fury was so cold. Perhaps he looked the way he had when he was killing Montague.

Hermione wondered if getting exposed as High Reeve were intentional.

If Malfoy were moving to seize power from Voldemort, he'd need to be known. Known and feared. Being revealed had been a calculated risk perhaps; banking on Voldemort's need for a public figure to spare his life. If things in Romania were as unstable as had been implied, Voldemort couldn't kill Malfoy now—even if he wanted to. It would leave a power vacuum, destabilise the entire Death Eater army, and give Europe the opportunity to break free.

There were no other figures in Voldemort's army that were even vaguely comparable. Voldemort had local government figures, but Malfoy was Voldemort's only visible crutch on a continental level

The most powerful General in the Dark Lord's army was what Astoria had said. A General for years; that was what Malfoy had said about himself.

Hermione paused puzzled. Malfoy had been a General during the war?

She didn't remember Malfoy being a General. She didn't remember much of anything about him after Dumbledore died. She had assumed his ascendance in rank had occurred at the end of the war, but perhaps that had been wrong. It had been hard to get good information toward the end of the war. Hermione hadn't been included in most of the specifically strategic Order meetings. It must have been a detail she'd missed.

There were so many things about Malfoy that felt incomprehensible. His power. The point of his ambition. His ironic talent for healing. His apparating ability.

A ritual intended as a punishment...

Hermione turned over the mystery in her mind.

It was probably what Voldemort had been referencing to when he'd spoken of Malfoy deeply disappointing him. Hermione wondered what on earth it could be. Dark magic rituals were generally physically corrosive and mentally eroding. Malfoy seemed suspiciously, even unnaturally, intact. In fact, as she thought about it further, Malfoy was impossibly sane.

With the quantity of Dark Magic he was exposed to, both through his own use and Voldemort's, he should be poisoned by it. Unless he was spending all his time undergoing purification rituals, his relative health seemed impossible.

Hermione had been ill just from entering Voldemort's Hall, while Malfoy had seemed entirely indifferent to it; and he surely went there multiple times a week. People didn't become indifferent to Dark Magic. It was like a poisonous drug. Addictive. Effecting.

Deadly.

Dark Wizards tended to use more and more, and stronger and stronger types of dark arts until they

eroded themselves away the way Voldemort was, or went mad the way Lucius and Bellatrix had.

But Malfoy was intact. Physically and mentally he was—pristine.

And capable of apparating across an entire continent.

How on earth was that possible?

Hermione kept turning the question over and over until she finally gave up. She had too little information to enable any guesses.

She moved on to a different problem.

She couldn't figure out how she fit in. Whatever Malfoy's scheme was, it seemed like she must be somehow included in it. Malfoy was too devoted to her care and maintenance for it to be otherwise. Hermione had thought it was simply because he was doing as ordered, but she was beginning to strongly suspect his attention went beyond that. He seemed personally and emotionally invested in her. The way he stared at her; the undivided intensity of it was almost undeniable. She was significant to him or to his plans.

Where did not getting Hermione pregnant fit into the strategy?

He hated raping her; didn't appear to enjoy it at all and didn't try to. It made him ill. So, wouldn't he want her pregnant as soon as possible?

Unless it had to do with her memories. The idea that a pregnancy would unlock the memories was theoretical at best. But if Malfoy suspected there were something in her memory that he didn't want unlocked... that could possibly explain it.

But even without a pregnancy, the memories were slowly beginning to re-emerge.

If she were pregnant, it would buy him nine months of exclusive access to them. So long as she was not pregnant, arbitrary memories might emerge for Voldemort to find.

Why would he keep forcing them both through five days of monthly trauma? Hermione couldn't account for it.

She mulled over the question again.

The only additional element she could think of was that Malfoy had to know she would rather die than get pregnant.

Would that matter to him?

She kept wondering until she fell asleep.

She was anxious all the next day; on edge and fidgeting until she started fearing she'd start picking her skin off. She barely skimmed the Daily Prophet before she began tearing it to pieces and folding it into every shape she could think of. She couldn't fold cranes, but she could fold aeroplanes and all sorts of other geometric shapes. She poured her nervous energy into folding until her fingertips felt raw.

She started walking through the North Wing, trailing her fingers lightly along the walls as she went. When evening came, Hermione took a bath without instruction. Topsy did not appear but dinner did.

Hermione ignored it. It was nearly nine when the House-elf suddenly popped into the room.

Topsy averted her eyes as Hermione stared down at her.

"The master is back. You is to get ready."

There was a pause.

"I'm already ready," Hermione said.

Topsy nodded and then disappeared.

Hermione went and sat at the foot of her bed.

When Malfoy appeared at the door they stared across the room at each other for several minutes.

There was nothing to say.

He walked across the room and withdrew a vial of Calming Draught which he handed to her without a word. She swallowed the contents, and then handed it back.

While he was taking his own potion, Hermione slid back on the mattress and laid down, staring determinedly up at the canopy over her bed.

She didn't flinch when she felt the bed shift. She didn't make a sound when she felt him shift her robes aside and expose her. When she felt him move between her legs, she bit her lip as she continued to stare up at the canopy. When he muttered the lubrication charm she balled her hand into fists.

When he entered her, she gave a small gasp and turned her face toward the wall in despair, writhing with internal anguish.

Her body had anticipated it. Attuned and waiting. It was ready. Wanting.

It was such a profound betrayal.

Knowing her arousal was physiologically natural didn't ease the guilt.

When the rape was clinical it was endurable. When the rape was drugged it was endurable. But when it was just her, her own mind and physiology, it was the worst of all. It twisted and tore at something inside her.

I'm being raped and my body is enjoying it, she thought bitterly and wanted to curl away.

She thought she might just vomit.

She didn't want to know if Malfoy could tell the difference. Whether he knew.

She stared at the wall and tried not to make another sound. When he came, he immediately removed himself, jerked her robes down, snatched up his robes, and apparated.

She didn't turn to see what he looked like before he vanished. She just pulled her legs closed and lay there. She could feel her tears leaving cold trails along her temples. The next two days were the same.

There was little sense of relief the morning after the fifth day. Hermione just felt cold.

Her room and bed had lost all sense of comfort to her.

She pulled a fresh set of robes from the wardrobe and went down the hall to the bathroom with the shower. Then she curled up into a tight ball, seated on the floor of the shower and stayed there under the water.

There was no point in denying it. Things had shifted. Nothing felt the same. Not any longer.

The potion was a significant factor but Hermione couldn't deny the array of other elements.

Malfoy was not the monster she had initially perceived him as being. After learning what was happening to the other surrogates; after what Montague had tried to do to her; after Astoria; after becoming terrified of what cruelty Lucius Malfoy would devise if her surrogacy were transferred. The person she perceived Malfoy as being had shifted.

Being 'saved' by him had affected things.

He touched her. No one had touched her in so long. He'd healed her, far more than he needed to.

He didn't even want to rape her.

Though he insisted his protection of her was entirely borne from from self-interest—because he'd been commanded to—she was almost certain he was far exceeding what obligation demanded.

The influence of the manacles also contributed to it. They'd always been intended to cultivate compliance and dependence. To remove her ability to resist.

If she could resist Malfoy's violation; if he were physically forcing her down as he raped her, it would be easier for her to stop growing resigned and accustomed to it. It was the lying quietly and experiencing it. The anticipation of an inevitability that she had no ability to resist.

If the ways he hurt her were more voluntary and less obligatory, it would be easier to see him for who he was.

Although even then, the mind was cruelly adaptive. The subconscious will to survive was written into humans more deeply than almost anything else. Survival did not require Hermione to be intact. To be decent. To be herself. Survival would carve away any part of her that made enduring harder.

It would smooth away the mental anguish. Latch onto every glimmer of kindness. It would make life cease to ache.

If she weren't careful, it would steal away every bit of her until she was so broken inside that she would accept her cage.

Hermione shivered beneath the scalding water still beating down on her.

She needed to stay away from Malfoy.

She wouldn't talk to him. She wouldn't let herself ask him questions. If he asked her something, she would answer as briefly as possible. She would stop engaging with him, stop trying to understand him.

She might not be able to control what her body did, but she could control her mind. Anything he wanted from her, he would have to force from her.

She dropped her head down on her knees as a sense of desolation came over her.

She was so tired of being all alone. She pressed her lips together as she struggled against crying.

Even her memory was a lonely abyss. Almost all the years of war had been alone.

Studying alone in Hogwarts. Then studying in Europe, there had been no time for anything but professional relationships. When she'd returned she'd practically lived in the hospital ward.

There was never time for friendships. When she had any spare time, Harry and Ron were gone on missions. When they were back, it was generally in the aftermath of a battle, when Hermione's skills have been most urgently needed. She had so few memories of being with either of them in non-professional circumstances.

Then, after the Final battle, Hermione's imprisonment under Hogwarts had been like an endless fall. Alone. Alone. Alone. Until Hermione's memory had cannibalised itself.

When Hermione had finally been dragged out and forced into the breeding program she had become reduced to her function. To Healer Stroud she was a womb. To Voldemort she was a potential source of war intelligence.

She was not a person.

Not to anyone except Malfoy.

He treated her like a person. He answered most of her questions, and he looked at her as though he saw her. He talked to her. He treated her as though she personally were of significance to him. When he hurt her it always seemed forced and unwilling.

Everyone else just hurt her because they could.

Even the House-elves would barely look at her.

There was no work to bury herself into in Malfoy Manor. No endless void to become lost in. It was just Hermione, sitting and wondering and folding paper; trapped in a cold house.

Malfoy was only bit of warmth or life or human contact she had. Whether he had intended it or not, Hermione was latching onto him in her desperate isolation.

She couldn't.

He had killed everyone. He had murdered or executed them all. Willing or not, he was raping her. She was just a pawn to him.

She wasn't going to betray her friends' memories in such a horrific manner. She wasn't going to betray herself.

If she died in Malfoy Manor she would do so clinging to the bits of herself that remained. Like Death itself, Malfoy had stolen everything away from her, and he was waiting to take more. She could stay away from Malfoy. She could refuse to engage unless he forced and coerced her.

She could. She would.

She was used to being alone. She spent the rest of the day resolving herself. Bracing herself. Malfoy was due for another legilimency session. He always came after her fertile window.

When he did, he would find all the thoughts in her head. He would probably taunt her.

She wouldn't respond.

She spent the afternoon building a card tower.

The day passed. Dinner came. Malfoy did not.

Hermione tried not to be anxious. She tried not to keep glancing at the clock. She ignored the tightening sensation in her chest as she kept expecting him to appear.

He was probably doing it on purpose, she reminded herself. Perhaps he'd been reading her mind when she had been thinking earlier. He was probably torturing her intentionally.

She kept expecting him to eventually appear until it was past eleven, when Hermione usually was asleep. Finally she went to bed.

She couldn't sleep.

She just lay there, wondering why he hadn't come. Maybe he was traveling again. The newspaper hadn't said anything but perhaps he still was. Maybe he was out with Astoria at some event, Hermione didn't think she remembered anything being mentioned in the society pages. Maybe they'd just gone to dinner. Did he and Astoria go to dinner together?

Hermione lay in bed wondering until the clock on the wall indicated it was nearly two in the morning.

She got out of bed. There was a nearly full moon.

She went to the door and left her room, wandering through the moonlit hallways of the North Wing. The portrait followed her like a pale wraith.

Hermione's fingers trailed along walls as she walked. She never had panic attacks inside the manor, but the sensation of the wall beneath her fingers was steadying.

The moonlight cast long, sharp shadows across the floors and walls.

A thought abruptly struck Hermione. What if Malfoy died? Would she even know? Probably not. Not for days. Healer Stroud would come and take Hermione to be transferred to some other legilimens. Maybe Voldemort would bring Snape back from Romania and order him to impregnate her instead.

What if she were already pregnant? The thought made her cold. What if she were pregnant and Malfoy died? Would Voldemort wait for her to give birth and then drag her memories out himself? Or would he make Stroud abort the baby so Hermione could be transferred? If she carried it to term then, what would happen to it? Would Voldemort give the baby to Astoria? Astoria would kill it. She'd torture it to death. If it looked like Malfoy and Hermione, Astoria would probably tear its eyes out and burn it, starve it to death...

Hermione gasped and started hyperventilating in the hallway.

There was nothing she could do. Nothing. She couldn't do anything.

She had spent months wishing Malfoy would die but now the thought filled her with terror.

What if he was dead?

She kept breathing faster and faster. Her hands and arms started pricking as though there were needles grazing her skin. Her chest felt compressed as though she were being crushed. She couldn't make herself calm down.

Suddenly there was a shifting in the darkness. Hermione froze, choked down a gasp, and glanced around.

Malfoy stepped out of the darkness. She was certain he hadn't been there a moment before.

The moonlight caught his pale hair and skin, and he looked terrifying and angelic at the same time.

She stared at him, feeling her initial panic fade away. He wasn't dead or dying. The sense of relief she felt at seeing him—

She tried not to dwell on it as she studied him carefully.

There was something about his face...

The tension in it seemed slightly eased from the hard cold expression she was so used to. He looked less on the verge of a breakdown.

He came closer to her. His eyes traveling down her slowly as he sized her up.

"Granger."

Her name rolled from his lips like a purr. She felt a shiver of uncertainty pass through her. He never called her by her surname, not once since she had arrived. She was always Mudblood.

Her eyes widened.

He was drunk.

His steps remained steady and his voice was unslurred, but—she was sure of it.

She didn't move.

He drew nearer, until she shuffled backwards, but he kept coming closer. Until she was trapped against the wall, and he was mere inches from her. "Oh, Granger." He sighed, staring down at her. He raised a hand and placed it across her throat, but didn't squeeze; he just left it there. She could feel the heat of it seeping into her skin.

She stared up at him. Even drunk, his expression was a mask. She wasn't sure what he intended to do next. He slid his thumb lightly along her neck and she felt her skin prickle.

He sighed again. "If I'd known what pain you'd cause me, I never would have taken you." He just stood there, holding her throat. She could feel her pulse fluttering against his hand. She wasn't sure what he meant; if she was supposed to apologise.

She could smell the alcohol on his breath.

"But," he said after a minute, "at this point, I suppose I deserve to burn. I wonder, if you'll burn too."

His face was suddenly close to hers, she could feel the air from his words brushing against her skin.

His lips crashed into hers.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains a brief episode of self-harm.

He tasted of firewhiskey.

It was a punishing kiss. The moment their lips touched, he crushed her body against his. His hand on her throat slid back and up to the nape, tangling his fingers in her hair as he deepened the kiss. His other hand reached up and cradled her cheek in the palm of his hand for a moment before it slipped down along her body.

He angled her head up as he kept kissing her. His tongue pushing into her mouth before withdrawing as he nipped her lips. Hard enough to hurt, but not to bleed. Then, when she was gasping for breath, he pulled his mouth away and started kissing along her throat.

Hermione was frozen in shock. Pliant and stunned in his possessive hands.

He was pulling at her clothes. She could feel the outer robe slipping onto the floor, and the top buttons of the dress open as the cold manor air hit her. He ripped buttons off as he exposed her and explored her bared skin.

He was grinding himself against her as he pulled the dress down over her shoulders, stripping her to the waist.

The cold air bit against her skin, and she felt her nipples harden in the cold as his hands darted up to palm her breasts and tease her. His mouth was at the juncture of her neck and shoulder, and he was kissing and nipping his way along it when suddenly he reached a spot and she—moaned.

They both froze.

Malfoy wrenched himself away.

He stood there looking at her. She was slumped against the wall, half stripped, and—aroused.

His eyes were wide, as though he'd just become aware of himself. He stayed there looking shocked for several moments before the mask suddenly clicked back into place. His face grew hard and he smirked.

"Apparently you *have* accepted your place," he said with a leer. Then he turned on his heel and vanished into the darkness.

Hermione stayed there in shock. She felt frozen, as a cold sense of devastation crept over her.

She was—she had been...receptive. To Malfoy.

Her pliancy hadn't been enforced by the manacles. It hadn't even occurred to her to push him away. It hadn't occurred to her to want to.

He'd kissed her and she'd—let him. She hadn't felt repulsed. It had thrilled something lonely and aching inside of her. Being touched. Someone with warm hands caressing her. It was a longing laced

right through the very fiber of her.

Trapped in the manor, she was latching onto any scrap of kindness she could find.

But it wasn't kindness.

Malfoy wasn't kind; he simply wasn't cruel. He wasn't as awful as he could be. He possessed the meagerest shreds of decency.

Apparently, in her fracturing mind, a absence of cruelty was sufficient solace. For her starved heart, it was enough.

A strangled sob tore itself from her, and she gathered her robes around herself and fled back to her room.

Flinging the doors of her wardrobe open, she wrenched out a new set of robes and buttoned them up as rapidly as possible. Then she wrapped her arms around herself for an additional sensation of security. Of decency.

She was better than this.

She wasn't going to let her psychological survival instincts trick her into falling for a monster; into wanting the attention of the person responsible for starting the war; into being receptive to the man who had murdered her friends.

She couldn't let her mind rationalise into falling for her rapist simply because he wasn't as much of a monster to her as he could be.

She couldn't. Wouldn't.

Wouldn't.

Wouldn't.

She could bear being betrayed by her body. She wouldn't let herself be betrayed by her mind.

She'd rather break it.

She had to get out of the manor. She pressed her hand against the cold window and stared despairingly across the moonlit estate.

Then she drew her head back, and smashed it into the glass as hard as she could.

The unbreakable pane didn't break. Couldn't give.

She drove her head into it again.

And again.

And again.

There was blood streaming into her eyes, but she kept going.

Again.

And again. An arm closed around her waist, and a hand clamped over both wrists as she was

dragged away from the glass.

She fought. Trying to pull her hands free. Digging her toes into the grain of the wood-floor to push herself back.

Sobbing.

"Granger. Don't—don't." Malfoy's voice was close to her ear.

She pulled futilely to free herself as she sobbed and sobbed.

She was so tired of being hurt and alone. She wanted to be done. If she kept existing in that house she was going to try to find solace. Anything but being cold and alone forever and ever.

She wanted to be touched. She wanted to feel safe, even if it was simply an illusion. She wanted it—

But she couldn't.

She wouldn't betray everyone like that. Harry. Ron. Minerva. Ginny...

She wouldn't betray herself like that.

"I can't—can't—" She sobbed, trying to break free again.

"Don't hurt yourself. Granger, that's a command. Do not hurt yourself." Malfoy growled the order as he pulled her further from the window.

She kept struggling. "Stop."

The order was snarled.

"Stop trying to physically injure yourself." His voice was shaking.

She felt the manacles around her wrists grow hot as he invoked them, and she struggled against the magic.

"No–!" She sobbed as she felt the magic grow until it almost smothered her mind and her body went limp.

She slumped against Malfoy. He released her wrists and wrapped his arm tightly across her shoulders, as though he expected her to suddenly fling herself against the window again.

She just stayed there, shuddering and quietly sobbing in his arms. There was blood sliding down her face and dripping from her lips and chin onto the floor.

"So—" he said in a tense voice after a few minutes. "You found a way around the manacles, I see."

As she hung against him she realised dully that she had.

The compulsions existed in her mind. The order was not to hurt herself, but didn't specify any difference between psychological and physical harm. So—in a state of sufficient mental agony—she had been able to bypass it. She was hurting either way; she couldn't stop her mind from hurting her. The compulsion had been nullified. It was always in her mind.

Her interpretation of the compulsions had always been what had limited her. The command to be

quiet: she had interpreted it as Malfoy not permitting her to speak without permission because she assumed he would be vindictive like that. So she hadn't been able to speak. If she'd interpreted it as something simpler, like not speaking loudly, she could have spoken; unless Malfoy had clarified and specified the compulsion further.

The compulsions were built upon preventing willful disobedience.

When she wasn't thinking about the fact she was disobeying, when she was reacting instinctively or speaking without thinking, she'd always been able to get around the compulsions. She simply hadn't noticed it.

"I suppose I did," she said quietly, regaining her footing and standing.

His hands slid away from her. Something inside of Hermione twisted at the loss of contact.

He turned her and used a spell to remove the blood from her face and cast a healing charm where the skin had split. Her head was throbbing where she'd struck it.

"Why?" Malfoy asked in a hard voice. "Why the sudden need to go so far?" She looked at him. They were standing only inches apart. His steely, grey eyes were studying her carefully. He'd taken a sobriety potion since he'd kissed her; she could smell it on his breath.

"Why not?" she said in a wistful voice. "The options have always been escape or die."

"But this is the first time you were actually intent enough to manage it. Why tonight rather than yesterday, or the day I left for France?"

So he had noticed that she'd become unwillingly responsive. Hermione's mouth twitched and she turned her face away, pressing her cheek against her shoulder.

Don't talk to him. He is not your friend.

"I don't require you to speak to get the answer," he said after several minutes. "Although I would think you'd prefer it. We are due for a legilimency session, after all."

Hermione pressed her mouth shut, but her eyes flickered over to her bed. She didn't want to lie on a bed in front of him again. If he invaded her mind to get the answer he'd see how pathetically, desperately lonely she was. How significant he had become to her.

If she answered the question, she'd have some control over the narrative.

She opened her mouth several time as she struggled with where to begin. She felt so cold her skin hurt. She hugged herself, rubbing her arms slowly.

"I think I'm beginning to develop Stockholm Syndrome," she finally said quietly. "It's a Muggle psychological condition. A survival instinct or coping mechanism, I suppose you could say."

She fell silent and glanced toward Malfoy. He was expressionless, apparently expecting her to expound further. She turned away.

He sighed with irritation. "So, we're doing this the hard way. Very well. Legilimency then." Hermione stiffened and curled her shoulders in defensively. "It's something that occasionally occurs where a hostage can start to become attached to their captor—due to their dependence." She forced

the words out, her voice shaking. She didn't look at Malfoy.

She forced herself to continue.

"I don't know much about it. I didn't have much time to study psychology. But, I think I'm starting to rationalise your behavior; trying to justify what you do. A lack of cruelty becomes kindness. It's—it's a survival mechanism, so it operates through subconscious reactions and adaption. In order to try to make an authentic emotional connection, I might develop feelings for you...." Her voice broke and trailed off for a moment.

There was a pause. "Honestly, I'd rather be raped by your father than have feelings for you," she finally said staring at the blood on the floor.

The was a resounding silence, and she saw Malfoy's hands curl slowly into fists at his side.

"Well," he said after several seconds, "with luck you're pregnant now and you won't need to suffer the attention of either of us. You'll just be left alone."

He started turning to leave. Without thinking her hand darted out and caught hold of his robes. He froze. She sobbed under her breath even as she gripped the fabric tighter, dropping her head and resting it against his chest. He smelled like moss and cedar, and she shook and burrowed against him. His hands rose up and rested on her shoulders until she could feel the heat of them slowly sinking into her, his thumbs lightly running across her shoulders until she stopped shaking.

Then his hands stilled and he shoved her away violently. Hermione stumbled back and nearly fell against her bed as he drew away from her. His eyes were cold, and there was something unfamiliar in his expression she couldn't place.

He stared down at her for a moment, his jaw twitching, then he drew a sharp breath and gave a soft, bitter sounding laugh.

"You don't have Stockholm Syndrome." He raised an eyebrow.

"You don't care about surviving. Gryffindors are always eager to die." His lips curled into a sneer as he said 'Gryffindors.' "After all, you've been fantasizing a grand murder-suicide for the two of us for months now. No, the thing that's eating you isn't surviving; it's the isolation. Poor little healer, with no one to take care of. No one who needs you. Or wants you."

Hermione stared at him as he continued.

"You can't bear being alone. You don't know how to function. You *need* someone to love; you'll do anything for the people that let you love them. That was what the war was for you, wasn't it? You wanted to fight, but you were smart enough to know another foolhardy, seventeen year old duelist wasn't going to changed the outcome of the war—not the way a healer could. I don't imagine any of your friends ever appreciated that, did they? That the choice was a sacrifice for you."

Hermione felt herself pale.

"Potter and the rest of your friends were too stupid and idealistic to appreciate those choices you made. Quite a burden, being one of the few people smart enough to understand what was necessary to win; one of the only ones willing to actually pay the price that victory demands. They never appreciated any of it. You let them send you away. Then, when you came back, you let them work

you to death. Not much value or glory for healers—not like fighters. Even Ginny realised that. When Creevey died, they gave Potter days to grieve just because he saw it. You were the one who tried to save the boy, and what was it you got? Four hours and you were expected back on shift again?" "That's—that's not—how—it—was." Hermione's hands were clenched into fists so tight the bones hurt.

"That–is exactly how it was. You may delude yourself, but I've spent so many hours inside your memories I probably know them better than my own. You would have done anything for your friends; you would have made all the hard choices and paid the price without complaint; whored yourself for the war effort. But do tell me, because I'm sincerely curious, what did Potter ever do for you to deserve it?"

She glared up at him. "Harry was my friend. He was my *best* friend."

Malfoy sneered. "So?"

Hermione looked away and drew a shuddering breath. "I never had any friends—when I was growing up. I was too odd, too bookish. I wanted them more than anything, but no one ever wanted to be my friend. When I found out about Hogwarts, I thought—I thought it would all be different, that being a witch was why I'd never fit in. But—when I got there–I was still odd and bookish and no one wanted anything to do with me. Harry—Harry was the first person who let me be his friend. I would have done anything for him." She gave a dry sob under her breath and swallowed it. "Besides—it's not like there was any chance for me without him."

There was a long pause.

"That is the most pathetic thing I've heard in my life," Malfoy finally said, straightening his robes. "So, what? I'm your replacement Potter?" He scoffed. "If anyone so much as speaks to you, you can't help but latch on to them? Knockturn Alley prostitutes cost more than you."

Hermione's jaw trembled, but Malfoy wasn't done. "Let's be clear, Mudblood. I don't want you. I never wanted you. I'm not your friend. There is nothing that will bring me more joy than being done with you."

"I know—" Hermione said in a low, hollow voice.

"Although..." Malfoy said after a pause, "I can't deny you've improved on me of late. I'll have to send Stroud my thanks."

He raked his eyes across her body. Hermione drew a sharp breath and glared at him.

Then she scoffed. "Really? That's why you kissed me? Because of the potion?"

He shrugged and stared at her mockingly, eyes cold. "What can I say? Rape isn't really my 'thing'. However, your growing attachment is both fascinating and amusing to experience. I never imagined you'd be the sort to fantasise that my mandatory care of you indicated some sort of attachment. I can't even begin to guess how amused the Dark Lord will be to witness it in a few days. Potter's Mudblood, falling for her Death Eater rapist. I didn't think it was possible for you to be more pathetic, but apparently with Mudbloods there is always a lower point." He turned to leave but then paused. "I'll be back later to deal with your memories. Please don't assume that I'm dead because I occasionally have a better use for my time than wading through your tragic little life."

He snorted derisively one last time and stalked out of Hermione's room.

When he returned the next day, Hermione had barely moved. He stared at her for several minutes. She didn't look up or acknowledge him.

"Bed," he finally commanded.

Hermione stood without a word and seated herself on the edge of bed. She stared down at the floor. He didn't need her eyes.

There was a moment of pause before he forced his way into her mind.

He spent most of his time examining her memory of Snape. He barely skimmed through her recent memories. When he caught up to the present, he withdrew and left without a word.

Hermione felt—dead. If she'd looked in the mirror and found that she was ghost she would have barely been surprised.

Cold nothing.

That was all she felt.

She lay in bed and mouthed apologies to her friends for failing them all.

When Stroud arrived six days later, Hermione wordlessly crossed the room and seated herself on the edge of the exam table; mechanically opening her mouth for the veritaserum.

"You're looking rather grey," Stroud said, her mouth quirking faintly as she studied her. "How did the conception effects go this month?"

"I don't know. Isn't that why you're here?" Hermione said in a bitter voice, staring down at her lap and rolling the fabric of her robes between her fingers.

Stroud gave a cold laugh. "Clever."

There was a pause as Stroud cast the pregnancy detection charm. Then a longer pause.

"You're pregnant." Stroud's tone was triumphant.

Hermione's hands stilled.

No.

Please, no.

It felt as though Hermione had been abruptly forced deep under freezing water; no air, and pressure, as though she were being crushed on all sides. She could hear her heart-rate surge up until the sound of her blood roaring was almost all she could hear.

Stroud started speaking, but Hermione couldn't make out any of the words.

She couldn't breathe. Stroud was speaking to her more and more loudly. The words were rounded and indecipherable. Hermione gasped and tried to draw in oxygen, but her throat felt compressed —as though she were being strangled.

Her heart was beating so hard there was sharp stabbing sensation through her chest.

No. Please, no.

Stroud was standing in front of her, staring into Hermione's face. Stroud kept saying something, again and again. The movement of Stroud's lips was the same each time as the healer drew closer, gesturing. Hermione couldn't make out the words. Stroud's expression was growing visibly impatient as she kept repeating herself. The sound just garbled together into a indecipherable roar.

Hermione couldn't breathe; her lungs were burning as she tried to. The edges of the healer's face were blurring, as though she were bleeding into the surrounding air.

Everything was growing blurrier and blurrier. There was a sensation of needles sinking into Hermione's arms and hands.

Suddenly Malfoy was in front of her; his hands on her shoulders.

"Calm down."

His hard voice cut through the blurring.

"Breathe."

Hermione gasped, drawing a ragged breath; then she burst into tears.

No. No. Don't be pregnant. Give her to Lucius, let him rape and torture her to death.

Every time she drew in a breath it felt as though there were a knife being dragged down inside her esophagus.

"Oh god—No..." She sobbed the words over and and over as she shook.

"Breathe. Keep breathing," Malfoy said. His expression was drawn. His jaw clenched as he stared down at her and watched as she tried to draw breath.

It took several minutes until she stopped merely dragging in stuttering inhalations, and gradually began inhaling and exhaling alternately. His grip slowly loosened and he slowly turned to glare at Healer Stroud. His expression was enraged. "You know she is prone to panic attacks. You cannot spring information on her," his said in a furious voice, still holding Hermione firmly by the shoulders as she continued crying.

"I thought the panicking was solely caused by open spaces." Stroud folded her arms over her chest, and raised her chin. "Given how terrified she is of your father, I thought she'd be relieved."

"Perhaps try thinking more," Malfoy said icily. "I am beginning to suspect that you are intentionally traumatising her. You threatened her with my father and dosed her with a aphrodisiac without warning. Are you trying to cause her to have a mental breakdown?"

Healer Stroud snorted as she cast a diagnostic on Hermione. "I'm not doing anything that risks compromising her memories; there's no need to concern yourself. I've been quite anxious over their recovery ever since I realised she was the one responsible for Sussex." Stroud eyed Hermione coldly. "I'm curious how a witch who never even graduated Hogwarts, and without any formal training, single-handedly constructed a bomb capable of killing all my colleagues."

There was a long pause interspersed by Hermione's broken sobs as Malfoy stared at Stroud.

"She was a Resistance terrorist trained throughout Europe to become a healer specialised in deconstructing Sussex's curses; not to mention that she had a Potion mastery. If she could take apart and neutralise a curse, she could also use it. If you'd been so curious you could have asked me," he said in a cold voice. "Psychologically torturing her is not going to give you answers, particularly since she has no memory of it. Your program is not an opportunity to exact revenge. You appear to have forgotten that I do not suffer fools tampering with her."

"I wasn't—"

"You were. The Dark Lord placed her under my care. You are aware of how precarious she is. I have gone to considerable expense and effort to maintain her environment. Given that Dark Lord made no objections when I executed one of his marked followers for interference, do you really think he'd trouble himself over you?"

Stroud's pallor grew deathly. "My program—"

"Is a farce." Malfoy sneered as he said it. "The reason you didn't die alongside your 'colleagues' in Sussex is because your proposal failed to qualify as scientifically sound enough to qualify for a laboratory there. Where are your controls? Or your statistics and historical data? The spectacle you're so willing to provide the society pages is funded and staffed to easily carry on without you." Malfoy's eyes glittered viciously as he spoke. "This is the only warning I'll offer. You are no longer permitted to be alone with her. Today's appointment is over. If you have new instructions regarding her care, you'll give them to me. Topsy!"

The House-elf appeared with a crack. Malfoy didn't remove his eyes from Stroud.

"Escort Stroud to the drawing room. I'll be down when I'm done dealing with the situation here." Stroud huffed, but she was still pale and her hands shook as she gathered her files. As the door shut, Malfoy turned back to stare down at Hermione. She had stopped crying and was trying to breathe steadily.

He gave a low sigh and then pulled her to her feet.

"Come," he said as he led her across the room to her bed, studying her carefully before reaching into his robes and withdrawing a vial of Dreamless Sleep Draught. "Considering recent events I'm afraid I don't trust you conscious and alone. Take this."

Hermione extended a leaden hand and accepted the vial but then stared down at it hesitantly. Her breath kept hitching.

"Some Potions can result in fetal abnormalities. I don't–remember whether Dreamless Sleep is safe," she said in a wavering voice.

"It's fine."

She glanced up at Malfoy. How on earth would he know that? He met her eyes. "I was concerned something like this might happen if you ever got pregnant. I verified it."

She continued to hesitate.

"I'm not asking. If you refuse I will make you," he said in a hard voice.

Hermione pressed her lips together and swallowed hard as her chest continued to stutter. She unstoppered the vial unsteadily and brought it to her lips. As soon as she swallowed the contents, she choked and burst into tears again. The vial slipped from her hands and plunged down onto the floor, shattering.

"Oh god..." She sobbed into her hands as the potion hit her system and overtook her mind like a black tidal wave. She sank onto the bed. "Oh god...oh god...please."

Her eyes slid shut as she continued to cry. She was dimly aware of her legs been lifted up onto the mattress. Darkness swallowed her.

"*I'm sorry, Granger."*

Chapter 25

When Hermione opened her eyes, it was late evening. Turning her head, she found Malfoy standing in front of the portrait on the wall, speaking to it in a low voice.

The witch in the painting immediately caught sight of Hermione's movement and gestured over his shoulder. He stopped speaking and turned on his heel to stare at her.

He looked tired and singularly unenthused by his impending fatherhood.

Hermione felt as though she were going to be sick.

She squeezed her eyes shut, curled into a defensive ball and tried not to start crying again. She could hear the clipped sound of Malfoy's shoes as he crossed the room and approached her bed.

There was a long silence and she could feel his gaze on her. She tucked her chin down against her shoulder and willed him away.

"You are not allowed to hurt yourself, or do anything to cause an abortion or miscarriage."

It was not a statement, it was a command. She could feel the flush of heat around her wrists.

"I'm sure you'll try to rationalise it as being protective in an attempt to get around the compulsions, but it is not. You are not allowed to do anything to end your pregnancy."

She could feel the prick of tears in the corner of her eyes and sobbed faintly.

"Topsy, will monitoring you full-time now, to ensure you don't experience any misfortunes like tripping on the stairs, or chewing on a sprig of yew. She's cared for pregnant witches before, so she's well aware of what you can and cannot eat or drink. She has my permission to immediately restrain you if you try anything."

Hermione didn't say anything. Malfoy remained standing beside her bed for several minutes before he sighed faintly. She heard his retreating footsteps and the click of the door.

She stayed in bed, and alternated between crying and sleeping; curled up tightly, wrapping her arms around her stomach protectively.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry," she whispered again and again. "I would do anything to spare you from this world."

Malfoy reappeared after four days.

"You cannot lie moping for nine months," he said. "You need to eat. You should go outside." Hermione ignored him and hoped he'd leave. Unless he intended to force her from the bed she had no intention of moving. There was a long silence. She could feel his eyes on her.

"I have something for you," he finally said.

She felt something heavy press into the coverlet and cracked an eye open. There was a thick book laid beside her. *A Guide to Effective Care in Magical Pregnancy and Childbirth.* She closed her eyes again.

“I can’t touch your books,” she said, her mouth twisting as she spoke and her voice shaking faintly. “Astoria had them all warded against Mudbloods.”

“This is not from the manor library.” Malfoy’s tone was faintly amused. “It won’t burn you.”

There was a pause.

“I will expect you to get out of bed tomorrow.”

After he left, Hermione opened her eyes again and tentatively reached toward the book, resting a finger lightly on the cover. There was no burning sensation as she came in contact with it.

She pulled it closer, drawing it against her chest and holding it tightly.

The next day, Hermione forced herself out bed and went over to the window. The book was brand new; the leather spine creaked slightly as she lifted the cover, and the pages smelled faintly of machine oil and ink. It was three inches thick and printed on scritta paper. She started on the table of contents and read for hours straight.

It was a medical textbook rather than a basic pregnancy guide for a lay-witch. It was thoughtful of Malfoy to realise she’d prefer that.

She was deep into a chapter on endocrine regulation influencing adequate trophoblast invasion when Malfoy walked into her room again.

She clutched at the edges of her book reactively as he stared down at her with a contemplative expression.

“When did you last go outside?” he finally asked.

Hermione hesitated and swallowed. “The day you went to France. I went outside.”

His eyes narrowed. “For how long?”

Hermione jutted her jaw out slightly and flushed. “Less than a minute.”

Irritation flickered across his expression. “And before that?”

Hermione was silent and dropped her eyes. “You haven’t been outside since the equinox, have you?”

Hermione stared down, unblinking, at the page in front of her until the words blurred. Malfoy sighed.

“Get up,” he ordered.

She stood up, clutching her book tightly across her chest. He gave another sigh.

“You cannot bring that, it weighs nearly five pounds. I’m not having you drag it around the estate. Leave it here.”

Hermione held it tighter. He raised his right hand and gripped his temples as though he had a headache. “No one is going to steal it or take it if you leave it here. If they do, I’ll buy you another one. Leave it.” The final words were a command.

Hermione reluctantly put it down on her bed and then went to retrieve her boots from the wardrobe. While she was getting ready Malfoy stared out the window, studying the horizon. Then he turned sharply and glanced over her briefly before striding toward the door.

Hermione followed him slowly.

He paused at the door of the veranda and looked over at her. “We won’t go near the hedge maze.”

He led her through the rose gardens and then along one of the lanes lined with blossoming fruit trees. The estate was lovely in spring. Hermione couldn’t deny it, but the beauty felt bitter and poisonous as she took it in.

Neither she nor Malfoy spoke until he had escorted her back into her room.

As he was walking away she managed to speak.

“Malfoy.” Her voice wavered as she said his name.

He stopped and turned back to her; his expression closed, his eyes guarded.

“Malfoy,” she said again. Her jaw trembled and she gripped the poster of the bed. “I will never ask anything of you—“

His mouth twitched and his gaze hardened. She felt something inside her break with despair but she forced herself to continue.

“You can do anything you want to me. I will never ask for any mercy from you. But—please, please don’t hurt the baby. Even—if you have a different heir, it’s—it’s still half yours. Don’t —don’t—don’t—“

Her chest started to stutter as she struggled to breathe and not start crying. She shook. “Don’t let Astoria hurt it…” she said in a broken voice. “Please—please—“

Her voice cut off as she started hyperventilating. She clung to the bedpost as she struggled to breathe.

Malfoy crossed the room and took hold of her shoulders.

“No one is going to hurt your baby,” he said, meeting her eyes.

She pulled away from him, freeing one shoulder. “Don’t—don’t make promises to me that you don’t mean.”

His expression flickered and he caught her shoulder again, running his hands along her arms. “You have my word. No one will hurt your baby. Astoria will never touch it.”

Hermione bit her lip as she stared up at him and struggled to stop over-breathing. Her lungs kept spasming without her control. Her whole body shook as she kept dragging in sharp panting breaths and then immediately releasing them.

“No one will hurt it. Calm down now,” he said firmly. “You need to breathe slowly.” She leaned into his hands for a moment, resting her head against his chest as she tried to draw a slow breath; then she froze and tore herself away from him, backing up to the wall.

“Don’t— *amuse* yourself with me,” she said, her voice trembling. “I don’t want your promises or attention in order to ‘maintain’ my ‘environment.’” She sobbed faintly under her breath. “After all—you made it quite clear how pathetic I’d be—to mistake your mandatory care for anything—”

She wrapped her arms around herself and slid down to the floor, shaking and pressing her mouth closed as her whole body shook.

“You—you needn’t concern yourself further—I’ll take care of myself. You needn’t walk me again.”

Malfoy stared down at her unmoving for several minutes, while she pressed her hands against her mouth and tried to calm her breathing. His hand twitched forward slightly before he curled it into a fist, gave a sharp nod, and left.

She didn’t see him again for three weeks.

Topsy’s presence grew constant, although the elf was rarely visible. When Hermione so much as sat up in bed, the elf would immediately materialise and ask if she wanted anything.

During those three weeks, Hermione developed morning sickness. It arrived early and with a vengeance. Hermione could hardly bear to smell many foods, much less try to taste or possibly swallow them.

Fortunately, the smells of the outdoors did not bother her. When she was not rereading her pregnancy guide, she went on long walks around the manor. She made herself walk along the hedges, reminding herself again and again that Montague was dead.

She started getting headaches. It was a grinding pain that started as as a vague sensation in the back of her skull, but seemed to grow slightly worse every day.

When she was not walking or reading, she curled up in her bed and slept.

As her pregnancy continued to progress, her head began hurting so much she began clenching her jaw subconsciously to try to deal with the constant pain. The daylight worsened the headaches; bright sunshiny days kept her bed as she tried not to vomit from a combination of morning sickness and pain. Within days, the pain grew so severe she couldn’t read.

Topsy added dark, heavy drapes that kept out almost all the light in the room.

She ate steadily less and less. When she didn’t eat or get out of bed for two days Malfoy finally reappeared.

She heard him enter but didn’t pull her arm away from her eyes to acknowledge him.

“You need to eat,” he said.

“Really?” she said in a weak but sarcastic tone. “I had no idea. The medical textbook never mentioned that nutrition was necessary during pregnancy.”

She heard him sigh.

“It’s a magical pregnancy,” she said bitterly. “Even Muggles suffer morning sickness, it’s just worse for wizarding folk, even the Mudbloods.”

There was a pause and she heard him shift.

“Is there anything you’ll eat? That you think you could eat?”

“Chips from a greasy spoon,” she said drolly, “Or perhaps a bag of crisps.”

There was a long silence.

“Really?” he said in a doubtful tone.

She scoffed faintly, and it made her head throb so painfully it was as though someone had driven a metal rod through the base of her skull and into the centre of her brain. She gave a low sob. The unending, growing pain was like having her brain slowly crushed and ground into dust.

“Even if I could think of anything that sounded edible, I doubt I could keep it down,” she said in a strained voice.

She could almost hear him trying to think of something else to say. She rolled over and cradled her head in her arms. “Witches have been having children for thousands of years. Statistical probability indicates I’m unlikely to die from it,” she told him.

There was a pause.

“My mother nearly did,” he said. His voice sounded hollow.

Hermione said nothing else. Malfoy didn’t leave. He was still standing by her bed when she fell asleep from pained exhaustion.

Healer Stroud arrived a few days later. Malfoy loomed behind her like an ominous shadow.

When Stroud conjured an exam table in the centre of the room, he sneered at her. “Walk the additional ten feet to her bed and cast your diagnostic charms there,” he said in a cold voice.

Stroud huffed faintly under her breath and walked over to where Hermione was curled into a ball.

Stroud barely glanced at Hermione as she cast a complex diagnostic over Hermione’s stomach. A tiny orb of pale, almost blinding bright, yellow light appeared; pulsing so rapidly it was nearly fluttering. It looked almost like a golden snitch but it was miniaturized, a little bigger than a pea.

Hermione froze and stared at it. The light made her nauseous with pain, but she couldn’t tear her eyes away. It illuminated almost the entire room.

“That is the magical signature of your heir,” Stroud informed Malfoy.

Hermione’s eyes darted over to Malfoy; he looked rather as though someone had struck him upside the head with a bludger bat. His face was ashen and he looked half-dazed.

“The fluttering is the heartbeat. The size corresponds to the growth of the fetus. And the brightness indicates the magic levels; which are exceptional, as I had predicted.” Healer Stroud’s last words were smug. “Although it may make the pregnancy more traumatic for her. Powerful children often do.”

Stroud glanced over at Hermione and gave an insincere smile. Stroud spent several minutes casting various spells on the orb of light and on Hermione; finally she cast one on Hermione’s head. Hermione looked up. The glowing lights scattered across her brain all seemed the same, except there was a faint tinge of gold to the light.

Healer Stroud turned toward Malfoy.

“Have you checked her memories recently?”

“I have not,” he said. “She’s already suffered one seizure from having legilimency performed on her when her hormone levels were elevated. I’ll wait until her migraines and morning sickness pass. Legilimency is invasive and traumatic, regardless of the familiarity of magical signature.” Healer Stroud nodded. “It’s likely the migraines are primarily due to the fugues. Headaches during pregnancy are not uncommon, but the levels of pain the diagnostic is indicating are exceeding would be regarded as normal.”

Malfoy’s expression tightened.

“Is there anything that can be done?” he asked.

“Prescribing pain relief potions during pregnancy isn’t advisable. It can result in fetal abnormalities or miscarriage in the early stages of pregnancy,” Stroud said. “You could try Muggle pain relief, if you’re that concerned, but usually magically induced maladies require magical treatment.”

Malfoy eyed Stroud skeptically. Stroud jutted her chin up. “If you don’t believe me, you’re welcome to get a second opinion or bring in a midwife to corroborate it. The mind healer informed you that the corrosion process would likely be excruciating. It’s not as though anyone has ever created individual magical fugues around hundreds of their memories before. Magical corrosion is as painful as it sounds. The magic level of your heir is likely accelerating the process, but we don’t have any idea of how long it might take. It’s possible that once her hormone levels rebalance the severity of the pain will ease somewhat. But it’s equally likely that the corrosion process with stay this way for the duration of the pregnancy. It’s impossible to predict. There’s really nothing that can be done about it. There are safe potions for keeping her hydrated and from starving that can be administered if she can keep them down. However, unless she loses a dangerous amount of weight or starts screaming from the pain, interfering could risk her or the pregnancy and do little more than extend the process.”

Malfoy’s jaw clenched. “Fine.”

Stroud left shortly after that, but Malfoy stayed behind, staring down at Hermione.

She closed her eyes, and tried not to dwell on how miserable she felt and that she might stay that way for another thirty-four weeks. Her head hurt too much to even think. She tried to will herself to sleep. The tiny glowing orb of light appeared fluttering in her mind’s eye and she curled more protectively around her stomach.

She felt the bed shift and cool fingers touched her cheek, brushing back her hair and then resting against her forehead. She bit her lip and fought against crying.

She was so tired of crying.

She tried to pretend it was someone else. It’s Harry. It’s Ron. It’s your mum, she told herself; she didn’t force herself to draw away from the touch. After another week, she began to wonder if she were going die from the pregnancy. Despite the advanced science of obstetrical healing, Magical intervention in pregnancy was extremely limited. Magical pregnancies tended to either neutralise or react extremely badly to external magical influences. Hermione could keep herself slightly hydrated.

Topsy dosed her with hydration and nutrition potions multiple times a day, but Hermione could rarely keep them down for the few seconds necessary for her system to absorb them.

She wasn't sure if she actually was suffering from hyperemesis gravidarum, or if most of the nausea and vomiting was caused by the migraines. If she ate anything, she would immediately vomit and then retch until she was sobbing from the additional pain it caused her head.

She lost almost all her muscle tone.

She lay limply in bed in her darkened room and wished she'd die.

Malfoy came; often, she thought. He brought several mind healers who just stuttered nervously around him and offered no helpful advice. He brought midwives and obstetrical healers who cooed over his heir's magic levels and prescribed even worse tasting potions for Hermione to vomit up.

She suspected Malfoy came sometimes when she was asleep, because her over-sensitive nose would often detect his scent in the room. When he came when she was awake, she was hardly more responsive.

He would sit down on the edge of her bed and smooth her hair, and sometimes he would take her wrist and pull her hand into his. The first time he did it she thought he was playing with her fingers, but gradually she realised he was massaging her hand; tapping the tip of his wand across it at various pressure points, sending mild vibrations into the muscles. Then he'd bend and massage her fingers and palm lightly.

He was doing what healers did to treat the tremors from the cruciatus, she realised. He must have memorised the technique due to how frequently he needed the treatment.

She didn't pull her hand away.

She told herself it was only because it might make her head hurt more if she moved.

As the end of May approached, her head steadily hurt more and more. She grew thinner and thinner until the manacles could slide halfway up her forearms. Topsy became fretful and began to meet Hermione's eyes as she softly entreated Hermione to try to swallow more potions or sip on some peppermint or ginger tea.

Malfoy began to hover. He had to leave to 'hunt' and perform other duties that Hermione tried not to think about, but he was often in her room. He didn't talk to her. He rarely met her eyes, but he smoothed her hair, and held her hands and fidgeted with the manacles around her wrists. Sometimes when she opened her eyes she'd find him staring at her stomach, but he never tried to touch it.

She was almost nine weeks pregnant when she abruptly woke up panicking.

There was something—something she needed to be ready for. She couldn't remember—

It was important. The most important thing. The thing she couldn't forget.

She needed to be ready.

No matter what. She was supposed to hold on.

She forced herself out of the bed. The pain of being upright had her gasping. She clutched her head.

She forced herself to stand.

She had to—

She couldn't remember. It was right at the edge.

Her legs trembled from the muscle atrophy. She forced herself to walk and tried not to panic.

She was supposed to be doing—something.

What was it?

Topsy appeared. "Is you needing anything?"

"No," Hermione said in a shaking voice as she wracked her mind and tried to think. Oh god, what was it? Her heart started to race as she struggled to remember. To think through the blinding pain.

There were black spots steadily dancing in her vision, growing larger and larger. The pain in her head kept growing.

Malfoy was suddenly in front of her. Did he apparate? She didn't hear it.

"What—?" he started and broke off when he found her standing in front of him.

"I—can't—remember...," she forced out. "I'm— supposed to—hold—"

Her voice broke off in a low cry as the pressure in her head grew so intense she thought she'd pass out. Her vision wavered. She blinked, trying to see, and when her sight cleared she found Malfoy had a knife in his hand. She looked up at him, startled. His expression was cold and intent as he lunged toward her.

She fell back, trying instinctively to ward him off.

The moment before he stabbed her, Malfoy suddenly vanished.

Alastor Moody was standing in front of her. Grim-faced and tired. *"An opportunity has come up. One that could change the tide of the war."*

Before Hermione could say anything, Moody was gone and she was falling. No, she wasn't falling.

Malfoy was holding her by the throat and slamming her into the ground.

There was the punch of a knife blade sliding between her ribs. She was in the middle of a battlefield. Everyone was falling to the ground, suffocating. Harry. Ron. Death Eaters. Everyone was dying around her and she was screaming.

"How many times do you think I can stab you before the light goes out in your eyes?"

Ginny crying, "I didn't mean to." "Something to warm my cold heart." A hard kiss as she was pinned against the wall. "I didn't want you." The sensation of her wrist, shattering under an iron grip. "You seem pleased to have successfully whored yourself. Happy to know you've got your chess piece locked in place?"

Harry was standing in front of her, pale and enraged, his face crusted with dried blood, "If that's how little you believe in us then you aren't someone whose help I need."

She was sitting next to Tonks, who was staring at Hermione guardedly, her eyes suspicious. "How many people did you kill today, Hermione? Ten? Fifteen? Do you even know?"

Minerva McGonagall, gripping a teacup, her voice shaking, "You're no sinner; this is not a fate you deserve. And yet, it seems as though you're determined to try damning yourself if it means winning."

Her own voice, "If my soul is the price of protecting them—of protecting you. That's—that's not a price. That's a bargain." "You're mine. You swore yourself to me," growled into her ear.

Severus looking coldly at her, "If you manage to succeed you're just as likely to destroy the Order as save it."

Hermione crying, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I did this to you."

Finally, Malfoy was standing over her, his face white, his eyes glittering with rage, "I have warned you. If something happens to you, I will personally raze the entire Order. That isn't a threat. It is a promise. Consider your survival as much a necessity to the survival of the Resistance as Potter's. If you die, I will kill every last one of them." It was like falling as the past broke free, surging up through her mind and swallowing her.

END OF BOOK ONE

Manacled